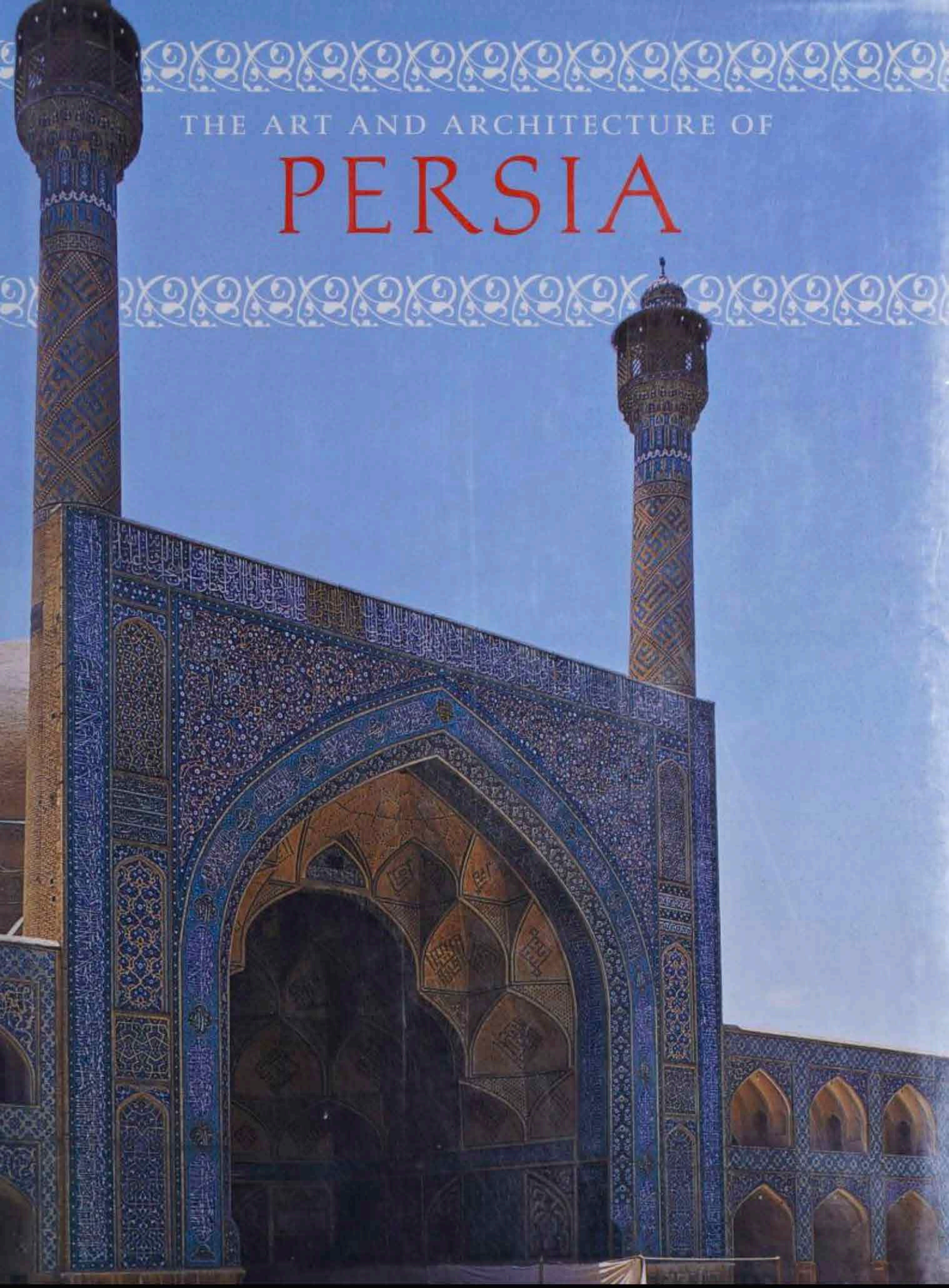
THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF

PERSIA



ART HISTORY/ARCHITECTURE

THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF PERSIA

BY GIOVANNI CURATOLA
AND
GIANROBERTO SCARCIA

This informative illustrated book surveys the art and architecture of one of the world's most ancient regions. Spanning millennia, the history of this area, now known as Iran, but often still referred to as Persia, boasts a vast and complex cultural and artistic legacy. Considered to be the world's first powerful empire (under the reign of Cyrus the Great during the Achaemenid dynasty), it was also the largest empire of the ancient world, stretching from the Balkans and Turkey in the west to Pakistan in the east. Throughout the centuries, this area's architecture, as well as the entire range of the applied arts has become emblematic of a fascinating culture.

Beginning with ancient Persian civilization in 550 BC, through the Islamic period, and on to the modern era, this volume explores the common characteristics and themes running through Persian art. In their authoritative text, co-authors Giovanni Curatola and Gianroberto Scarcia relate the history of Persia's cultural and artistic achievements over the course of 2,500 years, emphasizing late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In Part I, Scarcia examines the art and architecture of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sasasians, particularly the architecture from Persepolis and elsewhere as well as the prized metalwork produced by these cultures. Continuing the artistic progression in Part II, Curatola describes such pivotal structures as the Congregational Mosque of Esfahān and the mausoleum of a medieval sultan in Goribad-e Qabus. He also explores the flowering of Persian art during the Islamic period, when architectural decoration was dominant, with its chromatic effects etched onto massive buildings. While the variety of the arts is presented throughout, individual chapters are devoted to the legacy of carpets and miniatures.

Illustrating the text are some 250 striking color photographs of architectural landscapes, monuments, sculptures, carpets, miniature paintings, and ornaments, which transport the reader on an unforgettable tour of the region and the art produced there over the ages. In addition, the back matter includes detailed notes to the text and an expanded bibliography.

THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF PERSIA

Giovanni Curatola • Gianroberto Scarcia

THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF PERSIA

Translated by Marguerite Shore

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FRONT COVER: Façade of the south *iwan*, flanked by two minarets, at the Congregational Mosque (Masjid-i Jum'a), Esfahān.
BACK COVER, clockwise starting from upper right: capital with bull heads, from the large audience hall of the palace of Artaxerxes at Susa, Musée du Louvre, Paris; bronze statue of an Elymaic sovereign, Shami, first century BC–first century AD, National Museum, Tehran; gold *rhyton* in the form of a winged lion, from Ecbatana, National Museum, Tehran.
FRONTISPIECE: Carpet with animals and medallions, second half of the sixteenth century, Staatliche Museen, Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Islamische Kunst.

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PREFACE

The region of the area now known as Iran, but still often referred to as Persia, is well known for its complex and varied arts, in the broadest historical and cultural sense. Through the centuries this area's architecture, as well as the entire range of the applied arts practiced by craftsmen at the highest level, has become emblematic of a rich culture.

The coauthors of this book both address one broad period of what is generally defined as Persian art and set out to clarify its characteristic principles and continuities. Rather than overemphasizing a hypothetical Iranian spirit or an exclusive genius of the place, we aim to document a uniquely original path of the arts in Iran and their logical influences and sequences through different coherent stages. In this approach, it has often been necessary to investigate and emphasize external influences on specific aspects of Iran's artistic production. This is not to reduce the importance of indigenous developments, but to clarify how this land was such a hotbed of specific influences, nurtured by disparate elements that were constantly renewed and revised. We have laid these out in the discussions that follow in a way that we hope will be clear and informative to the reader.

We are identifying only one of many possible itineraries through 2,500 years of Persian art; for this reason we have had to only brush over, if not neglect altogether, many strands of influence in order to focus on significant advances. We have made these selections, which some might consider arbitrary, to offer specific instances of the extraordinary artistic experience of this land, which has been so influential for other cultures and whose own inspiration draws from the Mediterranean world, India, China, and the immense regions of central Asia. Our intention was not to present an organic and reductive history of Persian art—in which we would have been obliged to include the entire ancient and pre-Achaemenid period or, in the case of Islamic production, to dedicate at least one section to the region's exceptional pottery. Instead, we decided to focus on the most fascinating and unusual facets of a polyhedral culture that, by its nature, eludes scholarly classification.

To do this, we wanted to have a single volume treat both the pre-Islamic era—with its three most important phases, the Achaemenid, the Parthian, and the Sasanian, seen as an uninterrupted flow—and the Islamic period, with the latter also viewed in terms of its artistic continuity, which might seem to contrast with certain historical discontinuities. While there may be innumerable gaps, the picture that should emerge is one of an incomparable cultural and artistic continuity.

In all its phases, the Persian artistic experience acted as a bridge connecting distant lands: the Iranian passage along the Silk Route was long essential for commercial trade as well as for the broader dissemination of religious and material culture. And so Iran, already defined as a land of passage as well as development, reflected these advances in neighboring areas, leaving tangible and unequivocal artistic evidence. Armenia and Georgia immediately come to mind, as well as the Caucasus, which sometimes seems to be a small Iran in its capacity to attract and influence adjacent worlds, such as the Turkish-influenced Roman world. Then there is Mesopotamia, where, in Karbala or Najaf (the Shiite capital cities), there was not a clear juxtaposition with Qom or Mashhad culture, but rather a complementary relationship and a continual influence that we might term reciprocal. If much of central Asia was Iranian (Bukhara, Samarkand), in India, and not limited to the Mughal regions, there was not a precise positive influence that was able to bring in new artistic energy. Resounding confirmation can be seen in the tomb of Humayun in Delhi, which repeats and absorbs Western, that is Persian, stylistic features, and the incomparable Taj Mahal, without compromising any of these monuments' Indian or Islamic specificity. Again in India, in the lesser-known central region of Deccan, Persian influence is still present.

Persia collects artistic examples and reworks them in its own autonomous and shaded language, its extremely original, precise, and unmistakable manner, and then disseminates the whole with its generous cultural imperialism. It is an essential junction for understanding, in every sector, the multiform reality of an East that is often also Western.

Giovanni Curatola

Persian art or Iranian art? Even apart from the issue of which term is historically and philologically more correct, the question is relevant. The Western use of the two terms more or less as synonyms has in fact led not only the general public but also scholars to see in Iran something more than the fully legitimate and unimpeachable whole, that is, than the ethnocultural complex in question from prehistory to the present day, in terms of both itself and its various interactions, especially those that are antique, or pre-Islamic. To their concept of Iran academics might add, but in this case diachronically, those aspects of culture that may be considered offshoots, "dialects," or marginal phenomena with respect to the principal cultural vein that is expressed linguistically in modern Persian. This Persian vein, the triumphant offspring of Iran, produces in all the arts the true and proper dominant manner, or, as it were, the "Italian" manner (in the Renaissance sense) of Islamic civilization itself, which is the true and proper aesthetic pendant (equal but formally victorious) to the official "Latin" manner expressed institutionally in the Arabic of the Qur'anic faith. Simply put, Iran is that of the Avesta and Persepolis, and perhaps that of the Shiites or the Kurds; Persia is that of Hafiz and Persian-speaking Esfahān, and also—transcending linguistic appearances, please note!—that of Arabic-speaking Baghdad, that is, the substantially Persian world of the *Thousand and One Nights* and related figural art. "Persia" therefore principally refers to the field of development in the Islamic era (the long Islamic era) of Iranian civilization; moreover, it constitutes, especially but not only with regard to aesthetics, the leading element of Islamic civilization, which stands in the same relation to the heritage of Iran as it does to the heritage of Hellenism, namely, in a New Testament–like position of emulation but also of natural continuation. However, we should not equate the importance of the two aesthetic "Old Testaments" of Islam, Iranian culture and Hellenism, since it was Iran that had the upper hand. But then according to historical reality (and notwithstanding a posteriori Eurocentric interpretations), we should not even equate the importance of the heritage of Greece and that of the heritage of Rome to that other new religious ideology, Christianity, since here it was Rome that had the upper hand.

After all, in the West we have long spoken, and with good reason, of Roman art and Romanesque art (not of neo-Greco-Roman art), the watershed being, exactly as in the East, an essentially religious transition to a new creed. But this concept of, as it were, a secular

continuity in the West (firm enough that Dante's passage from Virgil to Beatrice doesn't pose a problem and that the oft-invoked "good Apollo" awakens no suspicions of crypto-paganism) has not kept the moderns, since the age of nationalism and colonial exoticism, from seeing a wider gap between Zoroaster and Muhammad than between Apollo and Jesus. They have even discerned, in the "perennially Persian" features of Islamic culture, an ahistorical reconquest of Muhammad by Zoroaster. And here the parallel would be with the old myth that *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* ("captive Greece captured her fierce captor").

In any case the analogy stands, even if we are not proposing to rebaptize Islamic art as merely "neo-Iranian" or "Persianesque," following the example of the Romanesque world.

The analogy stands, although compared to the Romanesque or Romanic world, the Islamic world seems to be the creator of a golden medieval classicism—the more complete and self-assured in its own courtly "Persian" canons, the greater the contributions (perfectly homogenized and assimilated) of "other" cultures. If Islam is what it is, in the unmistakability of its synthesis, this is also due to the encounter and the fusion (never encountered before, otherwise, or elsewhere) of the forms of the two rival late-antique empires, that is, Iran and Rome, as it is also known in Islam, though here Rome may be taken to mean the entire classical heritage. And from this fusion is not lacking the influence of the "Barbarians," though it is much less decisive (and, perhaps paradoxically for some, less "Scythian" and rather more domesticated into a civilized exoticism), as seen in the praetorian Turks' nostalgia for the Altai Mountains and the Steppes. But with Islam interact, above all, classicisms other than the Roman: classicisms of a more remote East (Buddhist, Chinese), which by successive gusts nurtured and strengthened the fundamental Persian style without substantially altering it.

Indeed, in the Romanesque West, Rome stands more alone and is less Greek and less Platonic than Islam's Rome. Again perhaps paradoxically, the most "Roman" or "Romanesque" forms in Islam are those that were originally Arabo-Mediterranean. And in Islam these end up finding themselves rather isolated, in the minority not only on the ocean that carried the mature Persian style as far as Indonesia, but also on the Mediterranean itself after the millennium, when that style reached its apogee and, passing by way of Egypt and Sicily, caused the ancient "Roman" Cordoba to be forgotten in the Alhambra.

It is absolutely legitimate, therefore, to treat pre-Islamic Persia and Islamic Persia as a whole. For Islam, Persia constantly remains the supreme aspiration, simply the model to be followed, the ideal, the aesthetic utopia, the standard canon. It represents at once the mannered style and the hyper-correct one: both are highly imaginative and also visionary, part of that utopia and that canon, subjected to a process of continual self-mimicry, even if this process is based more on the permanent, archetypal phantasms of the mind than on the ephemeral, crumbling, or lost material prototypes.

And so it is more methodologically questionable, perhaps, to limit a study of Perso-Islamic things to the geographically Persian or Persian-speaking realm. And in fact, on the one hand, these are boundaries that our discourse does not respect. On the other hand, far from presenting this as a synthetic and exhaustive study, we do limit ourselves to highlighting individual episodes from this immense whole. Thus we present fragments of this cultural and aesthetic experience, circumscribed also by the limitations of our personal expertise and by our considerations of what seems most in need of attention or clarification, compared to perhaps more sensational but already well-known episodes.

Gianroberto Scarcia

PERSIA FROM THE ACHAEMENIDS TO THE SASANIANS

550 BC–AD 650

Gianroberto Scarcia

1. Royal hunt, detail from the left panel of the grotto of Taq-i Bustan

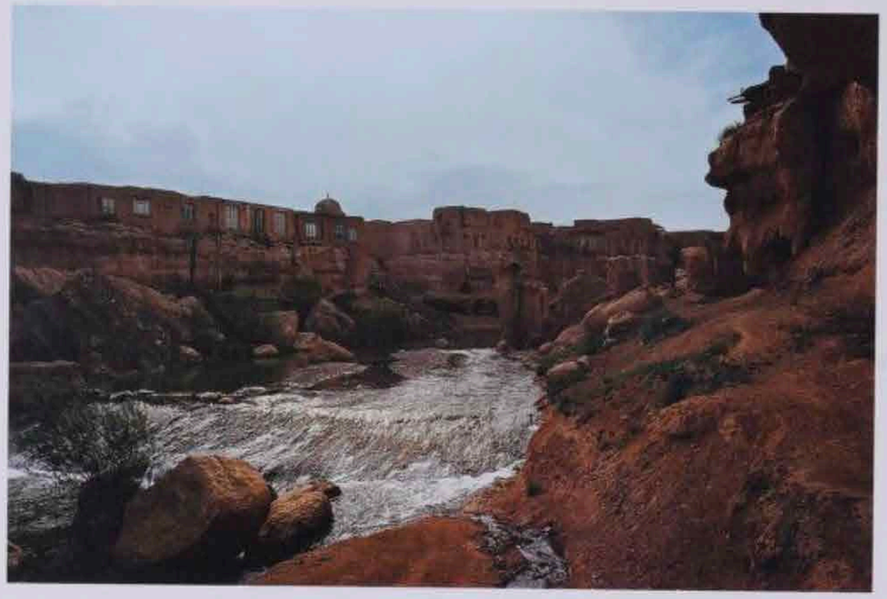
2. Map of ancient Iran. A slash (/) in the place names indicates a name change of the site in a subsequent era. Present-day countries are indicated in brackets (from E. Porada, *Antica Persia*, Milan, 1962).

INTRODUCTION

LINGUISTIC AND GEOGRAPHIC DATA

What we now know as Iran—also traditionally and commonly known as Persia in the West—is a multinational Asian state. "Iran" is a designation officially revived in recent times to replace a more evocative if foreign name, but unfortunately it is not immune from the influence of historical-political vicissitudes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries linked to the term "Aryan." In any case, it reflects certain values shared by Iranians and Indians. In addition to a polytheistic religious system, organized in similar fashion, another cultural affinity between the two peoples is, this sort of extremely ancient epithet conferred upon them, namely the term *arya* from Sanskrit texts. This term then leads back to the ancient Iranian *airyana*, as it appears in recent Avestic sayings, to indicate Aryan peoples—meaning "ours" as opposed to those of Turanian stock—in Achaemenid inscriptions (in the Avesta, it is Airyanem Vaejo, the legendary land of origin of the Iranian populations). Analogies can be seen in the middle-Persian (or Pahlavi) *Eran*, but also, probably, in the official name of the Republic of Ireland, Eire.[1]

Numerous ethnic groups now inhabit Iran, within the framework of a morphologically unequal territory, in an original, somewhat culturally cohesive mosaic. Alongside populations that are Iranian in an ethnolinguistic sense (Persian-Tajik, Kurdish, Balochi), there are also Turkish (Azerbaijani, Turkmen, Qashqai) and Arabic peoples, all of whom long existed beneath the political and cultural domination of the Persians. Persian is the official language of the country, and the contribution of Persian culture has been fundamental for the development of a civilization that is called Iranian, but which has had an impact on a geographic-historical region that is much vaster than the area populated by Iranian races or that included within the political boundaries of present-day Iran. Broadly speaking (a bit as if one were speaking of Latin peoples and Romance languages), the adjective *Iranian* designates everything that leads back, in linguistic and cultural terms, to certain populations of Eastern Indo-European stock, such as Slavs and Armenians, as well as Indians. Today these groups of Iranian peoples include a considerable number of speakers distributed over an area that is much smaller than in the past. In addition to Iran, the Iranian languages are now concentrated in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and in certain regions of the Caucasus and Pakistan, but in ancient times they spread throughout central Asia, as far as the western borders of China.



3. Landscape of central Iran

4. Landscape of the south: necropolises at Sīrāf, on the Persian Gulf

The Persians, who settled in present-day Fārs around 1500 BC, belong to the Indo-European linguistic and cultural group, as do the Hittites, Greeks, Latins, Celts, Germans, Slavs, Balts, Armenians, and ancient Indians.

We possess no information about the hypothetical first Indo-European center, and any attempt at the linguistic reconstruction of so-called proto-Indo-European has remained unsatisfactory. In this regard, the recent and, in a sense, revolutionary scientific fashion is represented by the work of Gamkrelidze and Ivanov.[2] Simply stated, the stages of Indo-European migration can be summarized as follows: apparently, in a period and place that is as of yet unspecified—clearly before 1500 BC—this warrior and nomadic people, expert in metalworking and versed in fighting on horseback, not necessarily tied to the use of the chariot, split into two branches (eastern Indo-European and western Indo-European), from which the aforementioned populations would derive. The Persians, and with them all the peoples called Iranian (including the now extinct Medes, Scythians, Bactrians, Sogdians, and Chorasmi), belong to the eastern Indo-European branch, a distinction based principally on shared cultural and linguistic features, clarified thanks to archaeological investigation and historical research, and to a small degree determined by physical characteristics. It is for this reason that the dichotomy between the western and eastern Indo-European groups is based on language and on the pronunciation of the word for the number one hundred. In fact, the western branch is called the *centum* branch, the eastern the *satem*. In any case, one should bear in mind how the idea of cultural migrations currently prevails over the old concept of the migration of peoples.

Present-day Iran occupies only a large portion of the Iranian plateau, an area of approximately 635,100 square miles (1,645,000 sq. km), delimited (proceeding from north to south and then from west to east) by Azerbaijan, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. The greatest north-south distance is 1,616 miles (2,600 km); the greatest east-west distance is 1,305 miles (2,100 km). The Iranian plateau itself represents only a portion of the theater of Iranian civilization, both pre-Islamic and Islamic. Modern Iran covers more than the western half of the Iranian plateau, south of the Elburz Mountains, and from the Zagros Mountains eastward, ending on the coasts of the Persian Gulf, and including a small part of the Seistan depression. In terms of well-known historical designations, this is Media Magna, or Gibar in Arabic, or Iraq 'Agiami (Kurdistan and Lorestān); Media Atropatene (Azerbaijan); Media Ragiana (the region of Tehran); Persis (Fārs and Laristan); Arachosia (Kermān, Balūchestān); and western Khorāsān (Parthia, Ariana). Added to these is the mountainous and woodland region that, accompanied by a narrow, long coastal strip, is located between the Caspian Sea and the Elburz Mountains (from Talish in Azerbaijan to Khorāsān, through Dailam-Gilān, Tabaristan-Māzandarān, and Hyrcania-Gorgān-Astarabad), and the eastern corner of Mesopotamia, which was Susiana (Elam-Khūzestān). This list does not include many areas that are significant to Iranian archaeology, history, and civilization, such as Mesopotamia, northern Azerbaijan, much of Sīstān, Afghan and Turkmen Khorāsān, Transoxiana, and Khorezm. In other words, even if we take into consideration the entire Iranian plateau, today's Iran and Afghanistan, this would still not encompass the geographic territory of Iranian cultural influence, but only its center—traditionally known as "inner Iran," namely Iran par excellence, and culturally sedentary, surrounded by an immense "outer Iran," marked above all by the nomadic mobility of the Scythians. Describing inner Iran as "surrounded" is not completely precise; the vast area spills over, above all toward the northeast, into the immense area of central Asia (Turan, unlike Iran, yet also its alter ego), with a boundary traditionally marked by the Oxus River (which is why Turan was also known as Transoxiana). Another river to the northwest, the Aras, marks the

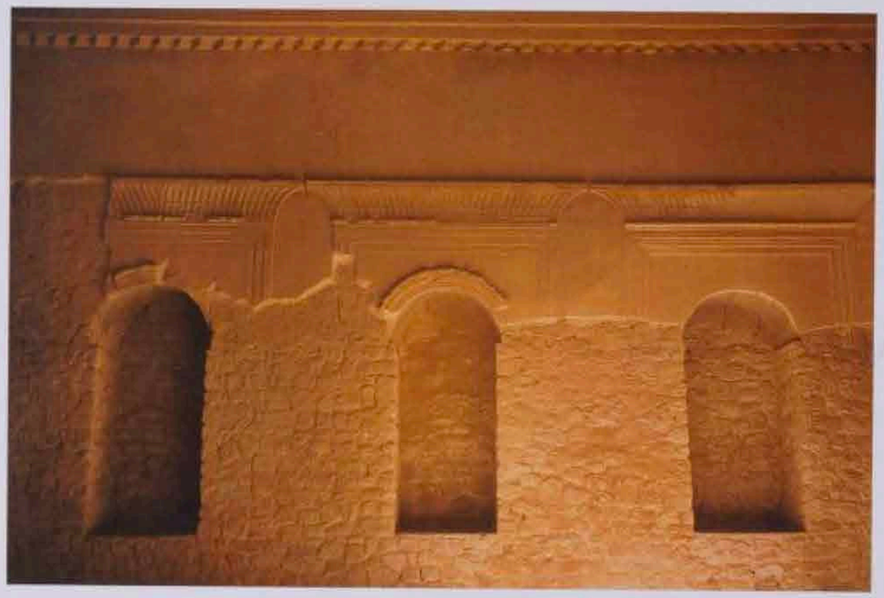
passage to the Caucasus regions, which also have interacted with Persia since the time of the Urartu kingdom. Along the entire western frontier, the cultural boundaries with the contiguous Mesopotamian lowland have never been definitively established or understood, despite the geography. This is not surprising, given the greater objective body of knowledge about that ethnically diverse culture, compared to the shadowy world of the Scythians. At Chogha Zanbil, Elam still preserves the most beautiful of the remaining ziggurat structures—more imaginatively called the Tower of Babel—but Seleucia-Ctesiphon, today in Iraqi territory, was, in fact, the capital of ancient Iran. The placement of an important city also clarifies the arrangement of the cardinal points within the Iranian vision of the cosmos, identified by four seas, each of which corresponds to a color: black for the Black Sea (which still goes by this name in all atlases, having overcome the misunderstanding whereby the Greeks who, interpreting black in ancient Persian to sound like their word for "inhospitable," turned it into "hospitable" [Eusino]); white for the Mediterranean, the western sea metaphorically characterized by the pallor of the dead; the red of the warm southern sea, a gulf that still reflects this naming; and the springlike green-blue of the eastern sea, probably the Caspian.[3]

Thus, there is no true analogy in terms of the nature of the ancient *limites*, or boundaries, between Oxus and the Mesopotamian water system. *Iraq* perhaps means "small Iran," and in the Islamic era, there is reference, practically speaking, to an Arab Iraq and a Persian Iraq—just as there is an Iran of the plains and an Iran of the mountains.

5. The walls of Yazd, now destroyed

6. A "tower of silence" at Yazd

In Persia—known by the example of the best communications routes that traversed the ancient empire—the organization of the state (administrative, civil, political) was a direct and conscious legacy of the great structures of the ancient Semitic world, including city-states such as Ebla, but also the Babylonian, Assyrian, and neo-Babylonian empires above the original Sumerian foundations. This protomodern empire was notable for its depth, whereby it achieved a sort of balance with non-Hellenic (or para-Hellenic) antiquity, although certain Eurocentric attitudes have produced a distorted view of that civilization. The term *satrap*, for example, has entered everyday language with a more pejorative meaning than that granted to *praetorian* or *proconsul*. The word *dean* also boasts Iranian origins and is related to the ancient rural aristocracy in that world. In all, there are striking artistic developments that show Iranian influence, particularly within the eastern Hellenistic realm, for example in Taxila (while certain reliefs at Stupa no. 3 in Sanchi also seem proto-Iranian), and there are some extremely refined western quotations. Does the architectural decoration of the Sasanian palace of Ardashir I (224–214 BC), near Firozabad (the "round city," forerunner of the Islamic Baghdad of al-Mansūr) recall the Achaemenid empire, or does it go to the Egyptian and Pharaonic source (plate 7)? Revealing what we might call a Mediterranean-centered stance, Cesare Brandi has said, "An Egyptian motif (the so-called chimney structure) as the only precise sign of continuity between Achaemenid style and Sasanian style? There's nothing wrong with that."[4] Likewise, aspects of philosophical and religious development (particularly eschatological and angelological) are astonishing and



lead one to think of Zoroastrism, or of other forms of Iranian speculation, as a source of inspiration for elements in Judaism and the monotheisms derived from it.

In terms of pre-Islamic Iranian civilization, the important cities of the Elamite, Median, and Achaemenid eras, as well as some from the Urartaean epoch, were situated within the political boundaries of present-day Iran in its western regions. The same cannot be said of the Seleucid era, which left scant traces on the plateau, or the Parthian era, for which the Transoxian and Mesopotamian centers have no less importance. But memories (as well as consonances and analogies) of the Sasanian era were unbroken, particularly in western Iran. For Islamic civilization, Iran has represented one of the most lively regions, and the cultural traditions of Islamic Iran and the eastern Islamic world (practically all the non-Arab world in that region) can be seen to overlap almost completely. Once Fārs had been abandoned, the center of this world was repeatedly Esfahān (the Būyid era, tenth century; the Seljuq era, eleventh–twelfth century), before shifting northward after the Mongol invasion (Tabrīz, Marāgheh, Sultaniyya), to gravitate around Herāt (in present-day Afghanistan) in the Timurid era and to return, with the Safavid dynasty, to Esfahān, where it remained until the early eighteenth century, before ceding its place, after a brief rebirth of Fārs (Shīrāz) as the principal city, to Tehran, which is the current capital.

While the name Iran is derived from the Middle Persian *Eran* ("Iranian" people), as opposed to *Aneran* (foreign or barbarian people), the Sasanian sovereigns were known as the "lords of Eran and Aneran," indicating the universality of their rule. The ethnic value of the term can be explained by the understandable relationship (in a certain sense analogous to that of the western *gentile*) between *aryo*, "noble," "good," in the primitive Indo-European community, and *aryo*, "nobility," "dominant class or population," in the Indo-Iranian community. The form *Eranshar*,

7. LEFT. Architectural decoration in stucco at Firozabad, which shows an Egyptian influence

8. OPPOSITE. Architraves with Egyptian-style decoration, palace of Darius, Persepolis

9. PAGES 20–21. Persian and Mede guards on the Tripylon staircase at Persepolis, sixth–fifth century BC

"Iranian nation," remained in use by ancient historians and Arab geographers, but the term Iran, as an Iranian ethnic-cultural unit, came into popular use with the poetry of Firdawsī, around AD 1000. The everyday usage of the word *Iran* to mean simply the Iranian state and *Irani* to mean "Iranian" are recent developments, as is the evolution of an Iranian national consciousness in a modern sense, dating back no further than the nineteenth century. The Persians of the classical era had no difficulty in thinking of themselves as *ajam*, that is, barbarians with respect to the Arabs, in the somewhat more substantial sense of *barbare*, or foreign, as it was then used in Rome. An analogous discourse can be made for Afghanistan, which historically was eastern Khorāsān, and, through modern vicissitudes, has become a nation-state, although a rather singular one in terms of its composite and quarrelsome nature. In Europe, the use of the term Iran is extremely recent and barely replaces the traditional western (Greek, Latin, and Arabic) term *Persia*, from *Persae*, applied to the ethnic Iranian group that was in power in the Achaemenid era and derived from the Iranian geographic region of Perside (Pars, Arabic Faris, neo-Persian Fārs), land of the Parsua tribe of Assyrian inscriptions. If the Arabic term *Faris* indicated only Perside, in ancient times *Farisī* or *Farsi* already was understood to be a language disseminated throughout the plateau (without geographic references, moreover, it was also known as *Dari*, which may have meant "courtly"). Beginning in the tenth century this written literary language of many of the Iranian races in a certain sense paradoxically emerged from, or more precisely attested to, Transoxiana (Bukhara). Today the Persian of Afghanistan is artificially called *Dari*, precisely to eliminate western Iranian geographic connotations. The Arabic *furs*, instead, indicates the Iranian population from the pre-Islamic, or in any case "pagan," era, while the other Arabic term *al'Ajam*, means "non-Arabic race" or "foreign" (literally, "of another language," but Iranian par excellence). The multivalence of *Tajik* is analogous. In the past it meant "Arabic" (from *Tayy*, the name of an Arabic tribe close to present-day Iranian populations in the western regions, where *tazi* still signifies "Arabic language"), but later meant "Iranian," as opposed to "Turkish." Tajik is still used as a synonym for Iranian, as opposed to Turkmen and Uzbek, in central Asia and in the eastern regions of the plateau (in Afghanistan, however, the Tajik language, known locally as *Dari*, in contrast with the Iranian language of *Pashto*, is not spoken, and above all is not written, by the Iranian populations). As for the curious term *Afghanistan*, which literally means "place of wailing and troubles," it is probably the result of an intersection and a Persian literary reinterpretation of an ancient local ethnicon, or linguistic slur.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

Iran's archaeological wealth is enormous, without any one defined prehistoric, protohistoric, or historic periods predominating. For every period, nearly all the principal centers were located along the grand routes that follow the natural east-west passages of the plateau (through Media, from Ecbatana to Rayy to Tus; through lower Mesopotamia, from Susa to Persepolis to Kermān and Seistan) and traverse it from north to south (Rayy, Qom, Kāshān, Esfahān, and from here toward Fārs or toward Yazd and Susa). From Fārs to the Persian Gulf, the ancient caravan route joined Firozabad at the port of Siraf, present-day Bandar-i Tahiri. Apart from the latter, there are, with exceptions, communication routes that are still in use, above all the Persepolis–Susa (now Shīrāz–Ahvaz) route and the Kāshān–Esfahān section of road, although the direct Qom–Esfahān route is now more popular. In the east, the desert lies between Rayy—now Tehran—and Kermān.

The prehistoric era, mentioned briefly in this volume, is characterized in Iran by a multiplicity of ceramic styles, offering proof of the intersection of various cultures.[5] This contrasts to the greater stylistic uniformity of Mesopotamia, with which comparisons are useful to establish a relevant chronology. Studies carried out thus far have made it possible to identify different cultures for every prehistoric era, with each culture known by the name of the locality with which the principal finds are linked. While traces of Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic preceramics and ceramics can be traced above all in the north (the Kamarband and Hutu caves in Gorgān and the Tamtama cave in Azerbaijan), and in the cave of Tang-i Pabda in Khūzestān, late Neolithic ceramics are represented by two distinct cultures, Tepe Sialk 1 (the first layer of the famous excavations at Tepe Sialk, near Kāshān) and Gari B, from a site in Fārs.

The Chalcolithic cultures followed, until the early years of the third millennium BC: Sialk II, Sialk III, Tepe Hisar I (the first layer of the excavations of the famous tepe near Damghan), Giyan V (Laristan), Musyan, Susa I (Khūzestān), Mushki, Bakun (Fārs), Anau II (near Iran's border with Turkmenistan to the east), Shah Tepe, and Turang Tepe (Gorgān), Sialk IV, "intermediary Susa," and Kaftari.

The Early Bronze Age is represented by Anau III, Hisar III, Giyan IV, Susa II, Tell-i Qal'e (Fārs), and the culture in the region of Bampur-Khurab (Kermān); the Middle Bronze Age is seen at Giyan III and Tell-i Shugha (Fārs); the Late Bronze Age, until approximately 1200 BC, at Giyan II and Taimuran A (Fārs).

The Iron Age (1200–800 BC) is seen above all in the famous Laristan bronzes from tombs in the valleys of Harsin, Khorramābād, and Alishtar, which first appeared in antiquarian shops in Tehran between 1928 and 1930, and soon made their way into museums and private collections. These were weapons, saddlery, brooches, votive or ritual objects, and tools with naturalistic or stylized decorations, which reveal certain relationships with Hittite items and can be dated between 1200 and 100 BC but no later than the mid-eighth century BC. Here we can focus on one example (a highly hypothetical case) that might furnish early evidence of certain aspects of Zurvanism, a problematic Iranian religious form that appeared later. There is an image of a trimorphic divinity, perhaps Time, depicted in the three ages of man.[6] However alongside these beliefs there existed the cultures of Sialk V and VI and the gold- and silverwork of Kalar Dasht, Khurvin, Hasanlu, and Ziviya, all from regions in northern Iran. In any case, these cultures are all represented in many different zones, as well as those mentioned above.

The earliest historical civilization in Iran that has archaeological significance is the Elamite. Closely related to the Mesopotamian civilization, it is often difficult to identify its specific features. This early Iranian culture developed from the third to seventh century BC and, influenced in turn by southern Mesopotamia, Ur, and Assyria, it reached its height between the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BC. The center of this culture's activity was in the southwest region of present-day Iran, but it left traces in other regions. Elamite civilization produced the first stone reliefs (sixteen in all, courtly or religious in inspiration), which would become so significant in the subsequent art of ancient Iran. The principal Elamite centers were the capital at Susa (architectural remains, ceramics, sculptures, jewelry, ivory, glyptic carvings), Chogha Zanbil (with the aforementioned ziggurat, and finds of every genre, as rich as those from Susa), Rishahr, along the coasts of the Persian Gulf, Tell-i Ghazir (architecture and ceramics), and Tulaspid (architecture), in Fārs, as well as sites where stone reliefs have been discovered, including Kurangun and Naqsh-i Rustam (Fārs), Shikaft-i Salman, Kul-e Fara, Kala Tul (Khūzestān), Khurin Shaikh Khan, and Sar-i Pul-i Zuhab (Kurdistan).[7]

The earliest Aryan civilizations, while indebted to Mesopotamia in terms of religion as well, left their traces primarily in northern Iran, succeeding the Urartu civilization (known for the inscriptions of Tash Tepe and Siqindil and for the stele of Kili Sin, all in Azerbaijan). In fact, the stone tombs of Fakhrakah (Azerbaijan), Utaq-i Farhad, Sinna, and Sakavand (in this case a funerary niche) in Kurdistan probably date back to the Medes.

The history of the Medes remains unclear, other than the essential outlines, and the little we know is principally due to Greek sources. In Assyrian sources they made their first appearance on the Near Eastern historical stage around the middle of the eighth century BC. Of the two principal branches present on the Iranian plateau, only the one settled around Ecbatana (present-day Hamadan, as well as the first capital of the Medes) remained independent, while the other branch, located further west, was adjacent to the Assyrian empire. Toward the end of the seventh century, the Medes, under King Cyaxares and in alliance with the Babylonians, destroyed the Assyrian empire (the end of which is traditionally tied to the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC). The Medes then pushed westward as far as Anatolia, although the eastern boundaries of their kingdom have still not been established.[8] Scholars do not agree about the relationships between the Medes and the Persians during this period, and some do not accept the traditional idea that the region of Fārs came under the rule of Ecbatana.[9] Moreover, archaeological investigations have not yet produced substantial results from the ancient site of Ecbatana, in part due to urban development in modern times.[10] Significant archaeological data related to the Mede period comes principally from the two sites of Godin Tepe and Tepe Nush-i Gian.[11]

In any case, as a whole Mede civilization is too ancient for the purpose of this survey, which will principally focus on post-Hellenic culture, in addition to taking advantage of the specific skills of the authors, whose archaeological expertise is somewhat limited. Additionally, the archaeology itself has not always proven to support the Greek myths, particularly regarding Cyaxares and the entire brief initial chapter, which acts as an introduction to Cyrus I and II; Darius I, II, and III; and Xerxes. Even in this case, what fascinates us is the Herodotean image of a capital, Ecbatana, which had concentric circles of walls of different colors, in terrestrial (and political-military) imitation of the heavens: an indication, without rashness, of an astral vocation in the collective psyche of those peoples. Moreover, a continuous tradition links the Medes with Magi (persons endowed with particular powers; the root in Germanic languages remained positive but takes on negative implications). The Magi are a group that floats across clans, castes, and categories, and very often has a problematic and antagonistic connection with political power and with Zoroaster.

Between the fall of the Assyrian empire (612 BC) and the expedition of Alexander the Great (334–323 BC), the eastern portion of the known world was unified by the Persian emperors of the Achaemenid dynasty. And it was then that the discourse became more culturally solid.

ORAL TRADITION, RELIGIOUS TRADITION, AND EPIC POETRY

As we have seen, the cradle of Persian civilization is the region of present-day Iran known as Fārs. We know little about the events preceding the Achaemenid ascent to power. Clearly the Persians were dominated by the Assyrian empire (1366–612 BC) and then perhaps subjugated by the Medes (c. late seventh century–550 BC), before rising up in rebellion.

Leaving aside all the preceding background, the argument of greatest interest to us in our attempt to pursue a path that is not only anthropological, but also based primarily on Iranian

10. Bas-relief of Naqsh-i Rustam, with a depiction of a divinity, perhaps the goddess Anahita

material, we inexorably come up against the unmistakable Iranian national sensibility, dating from before the culture became influenced by the Bedouin world: it is the markedly feverish ideology of the oral tradition, based on the fixations, circumscription, and humiliation of an everyday reality solemnly understood as a living ritual, imprisoned in a written literature, and with a consequent lack of interest in and even hostility toward the dating of events. This accompanies a marked correspondence between the historical memory of those people and the facts with which external evidence, in any case, informs us.

It is striking that neither texts of a conservative religious nature nor Iranian epic poetry pays heed to the certain protagonists of the first significant chapter in Persian history that we study in school. Even the Achaemenids, those figures who are familiar in the West—Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes—are ignored. Indeed during the Islamic era, which was a strongly Hellenized culture, even Persian scholars and sages such as Bīrūnī had to resort to hypothesizing that the Achaemenids were simply the western Iran's lieutenants for the true sovereigns who, according to local tradition, reigned in the East. Do tenacious memories of an east-west emigration of the peoples in question, with eastern origins, present the city of Balkh in present-day Afghanistan as the mother of all cities, and other nearby urban centers as the earliest human settlements? Perhaps, but nostalgia seems to have even more distant and northern roots. First of all there is Chorasmia, in a land of lakes and rivers that wander to the mouth of the Oxus, which might even help explain the Iranians' principal interest in hydraulic engineering, namely *hybris*, from the Hellenic *topos*, whereby those barbarians diverted waters, dug canals, and drained shallow river crossings despite nature and the gods. But in addition to Chorasmia, memory evokes an almost glacial land or era, with a ten-month winter and two-month summer, generating myths of the utopia of an eternal archaic south that would have been inversely shining, the golden village or grassland of an Eden, predating their icy history. This was the era of the fortunate sovereign Giamshid, who, however, at a certain point committed a sin: a sin—naturally, of sex—connected to reproduction, thus metaphorically associated with agriculture and with the history of mankind. The result was winter, and the desperation that follows the autumn equinox, and the alternation of the seasons, and the joy of the explosion of green with the spring equinox, and the expectation of the winter solstice, when the sun and light and warmth of spring are gradually reborn. But this deserved winter would not be seriously eradicated until the end of time.[12] The anguish of darkness, in any case, and the celestial illuminations as soldiers of light in the opposing nocturnal field ("lights with certainty on the black face of doubt," according to a verse by Nāsir-i Khusraw, a poet of the Islamic era), and the reborn and gradually triumphant solar light would dominate Persian poetry to the present. So would the color green-blue, the "sweet color of eastern sapphire" (but the Persians prefer their turquoise, which is also eastern for them, to the sapphire of Dante), seen in Persian ceramics. Light is called Mithra, and this Mithra can never be ousted by any prophet or higher divinity. Likewise the fertile, watery, and roaring Anahita (plate 10) will always prevail. And the green and the water will merge in *pairidaeza*, a Persian word indicating a type of garden from which, indeed, the Christian *paradise* would be derived.

In art, these become the English garden (following nature), the Italian garden (following reason), and the Persian (paradisiac). In Persian religiosity, the monotheistic tendency was tempered in a triad (the supreme Ahura Mazda, Mithra, and Anahita), which also brings to mind an analogous if not imitative trinity seen in Babylonia.

Giamshid was put to death by Dahaka, unique guardian of Eden's intriguing innocence,

understood specifically and vehemently as the separation of the sexes.[13] But Dahaka was succeeded by Firaidun, the first king in human history, and Mithra's favorite, who flourished.

Analogous to the erasure from history of Darius and his successors, there was no trace in the scant Achaemenid texts of a figure that should have been the keystone to the religious history of pre-Islamic Iran: the semi-mythical Zoroaster, who was nearly contemporary. He too was popularized and introduced to ancient public opinion from outside traditions. The essential facts can be read in two volumes by Gnoli, the last of which can be compared today with the criticism of Kellens.[14] And so the figure penetrates Iranian epic poetry in a dual fashion: as an extraneous element rejected by heroes faithful to accepted primogenial emblems, and as an abruptly introduced guardian spirit of those wielding power. These are leaders who from the time they officially established their state church broke with tradition. Simply put, the civilizing and savior hero—who crushes enemies, demons, and monsters; an indispensable aid to the kings under the protective wing of the Phoenix, the Rustam type (Rustam, the son of Zal, is a mythical hero of ancient Persia)—dominated the scene during the first part of the history of Iran until the arrival of the Prophet, who cast him out. In the second part of that history, the Rustam-hero type was subjected to a sort of unexpected and completely artificial demonization. The Isfandiyar type, the Zoroastrian king entrusted with a function that the Arabs called the "well-guided caliph," replicated Rustam down to the smallest details of his feats, which were archaic but always perceived as immutably vital, while combating him in the name of a new, absolutely generic faith, which was a sort of interpretation of Islam as a natural religion, as understood by prophetic Mediterranean monotheism. This is why the role of the reformer, evoked in written epic poetry, is completely in line with the canons of the Semitic brand of prophetic history (obviously Arab in particular) and can be easily inserted into an Islamic type of ideology. This goes so far as to paradoxically turn the followers of the religion of the Magi (*magūs*), those devoted to the oral tradition, part of the People of the Book, namely the precursors of Islam, into a text/memory or testament to be continuously renewed.

The difficulty of the transference is obvious in the efforts to Semiticize the demonic presences that devastate what we have called the first part of Iranian history. Indeed, the protagonist of the world of origins, the guardian of Eden, hostile to history—Dahaka—becomes Hebrew and Arab in that he is rejected by the post-Edenic national historic consciousness. But it is this demeritorious title that, with Islam, will encourage a reinterpretation of origins in a pre-Islamic sense. And in Islamic Iran, Dahaka will preserve both his negativity (he will be an Antichrist) and his participation in the theme of People of the Book.

However epic the euhemerism (whereby mythical figures are believed to be rooted in history), it lead to Zoroastrian reform where—even in terms of banal genealogical and personal data—the Rustam type (Rustam is a *dīgenīs*) is seen as an inextricable, chromosomally complex interweaving of a good/evil dialectic, that is experienced and suffered daily, and which will mitigate the original dualistic vocation with fatalistic temptations. He will always be ready to regerminate new forms of radicalism, both spiritual (Manicheism) and political-social (Mazdaism). In other words, the Rustam type at this point already represented an early form of compromise between tradition and prophetic innovation, superimposing itself upon the Garshasph type, a more archaic and more violent personification of the naturist savior,[15] sublimated in the official religion for its eschatological value. These archaic types appear inserted in a series of figures simulating a family, or a sort of dynasty, broken up by Zoroastrian reform and reduced to knightly functions with regard to the well-guided sovereigns. The most interesting

and significant name is Zal, the historical equivalent of Zurvan, the student/lesser divinity of the Phoenix, precisely like the Hellenistic Aeon/Kronos. This is Zurvan/Time, divided up into cycles, whose body is space, measured by the wind.

The gloomy Zal/Zurvan knows only the fatal alternation of white and black while the prophet is more merciful, offering creatures the possibility of a natural existence that is evidence of and occasion for ethical combat, with a positive outcome of many rewards and final punishment. Linked to this idea of a primordial creator's challenge to creatures is the invention of a soul that translates into poetic form the metaphysical truth of Platonic ideas that are preexistent to the shadowy and corporeal but illusory nature of all things.[16] The soul is the eternal aspect, the creature's subtle and non-dimensional double. It is the yesterday that precedes a today that is the same as an everyday in the centuries, and it will reappear in a tomorrow, equal to a resurrection. This has basic consequences in aesthetics because the visionary reality of the guardian angel is psychic truth of fantasy and the nature of dream, which in inner Hellas distinguished a phenomenon from the abstraction of the numen. It becomes, in this outer Hellas, characteristic of and opposite to the unique absolute that is comprehensible to the human psyche. The oneiric dimension is the heart (albeit fantastic) of our everyday experience.

The divinities of Iran are also angels, symbols, or concepts (virtues) personified and animated (thus the demons are vices). And the supreme Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, is instead a Female Wisdom. All this would have fundamental consequences for the *Kunstwollen*, or artistic volition, of late antiquity, where it will clearly re-emerge. This is not to deny that it begins in inner Greece, or rather from a polished Hellenistic syncretism.

As Darius says, with the language of the imperial collector of what is best in this world in the field of beauty:

> At this palace I built at Susa, the ornamentation was brought from afar. Downward the earth was dug, until I reached rock in the earth. When the excavation had been made, then rubble was packed down, some parts 40 cubits in depth, others 20 cubits in depth. On that rubble the palace was constructed. And the earth was dug downward, and the rubble was packed down, and the bricks were molded by the Babylonians, who did this work. The cedar timber was brought from a mountain named Lebanon. The Assyrians brought it from there to Babylon; from Babylon the Carians and the Ionians brought it to Susa. Teak timber was brought from Gandhara and from Carmania. The gold was brought from Sardis and from Bactria and was then worked here. The gems known as lapis lazuli and carnelian, worked here, were brought from Sogdiana. The gem known as turquoise, worked here, was brought from Chorasmia. Silver and ebony were brought from Egypt, from Sind, and from Arachosia. The stone columns, worked here, were brought from a village named Abiradush, in Elam. The stonecutters who worked the stone were Ionians and Sardinians. The goldsmiths who worked the gold were Medes and Egyptians. The men who worked the wood were Sardinians and Egyptians. The men who worked the baked bricks were Babylonians. The men who embellished the walls were Medes and Egyptians. Darius the king says: at Susa an excellent work was ordered, an optimum work was completed. May Ahura Mazda protect me and Hystaspes my father, and my country.[17]

DARIUS
THE CLASSICISM OF THE ACHAEMENIDS

It is quite interesting, and in a certain sense modern, that the recently recognized universality of an aesthetic output intended to celebrate an empire accompanied the Persians' awareness that they belonged to a specific ethnic complex, one that may lead back to the ancient Aryans or Indo-Europeans. Indeed some words from another inscription of Darius I the Great (the Achaemenid sovereign under whom the empire achieved its greatest territorial expansion: from the shores of the Danube to those of the Indus, from the Aral Sea to the Persian Gulf), carved in cuneiform characters on the facade of his monumental tomb in Naqsh-i Rustam, read as follows: [1]

> "I am Darius the great king, king of kings, king of countries containing all tribes, king of this great earth and beyond, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenid, a Persian, an Aryan, of Aryan lineage."

And to think that some consider Darius a usurper, and for certain scholars—according to a much debated theory—he is not even Persian. In any case it is clear that the term Aryan is used in the sense of both "national" and "universal."

THE HISTORY

Although the Persians date back to their mythical founder, Achaemenid (attested to in ancient Persian, in a form that probably can be translated as "he who possesses a spirit of a disciple"),[2] the initiator of the Achaemenid destiny and the first "great king" was Cyrus II the Great (559–530 BC), son of Cambyses I and a Median princess. He led a revolt against his overlord (his grandfather Astyages, son of Cyaxares) and assumed control over both his kingdom and a much greater territory over the course of only a few years.

In 547 BC he began his conquest of Anatolia, defeating Lydia, the leading power in the region, governed at that time by the enormously wealthy Croesus. The following year Cyrus also succeeded in subjugating the Greek cities along the Ionian coast, which had remained loyal to Lydia thanks to the relative freedom granted them by Croesus; Milatus had long been allied with the great king.[3]

In 539 BC Cyrus conquered the entire neo-Babylonian empire, which extended over Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine, with the help of both his weaponry and his far-sighted policy that sought to compromise with the ruling priestly class in Babylonia, which was unhappy with the lawful sovereign, Nabonidus. Cyrus, moreover, was successful in gaining the favor of the Jews by allowing them to return to their homeland, from which they had been deported by the neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadrezzar (604–562 BC).

In those distant times the regions of west-central Asia (corresponding roughly to the republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan), inhabited principally by populations characterized by Iranian culture and language, were united under Cyrus's rule but constantly threatened by incursions on the part of nomads. Cyrus was killed while battling one of these restless tribes, the Massagetae, and he was succeeded by his son, Cambyses II (529–522 BC).

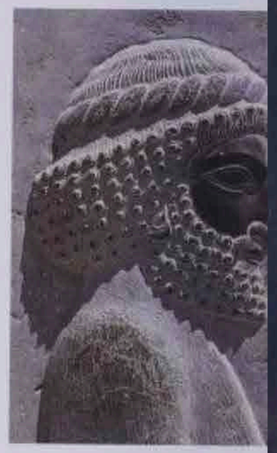
Between 527 and 525 BC Cambyses conquered Egypt and may have pushed as far as Nubia to the south and Cyrenaica to the west, although his exploits are still shrouded in an aura of semi-legendary mystery. Cambyses probably even posed a threat to Carthage, but according to tradition, he turned back when his Phoenician admirals refused to participate in the conquest of their African colony.[4] During Cambyses's sojourn in Egypt, the heart of the empire was laid waste by an attempted rebellion, calmed only after the death of the great king, which occurred during his return voyage from Egypt.

The greatest extent of Achaemenid territorial expansion was reached during the reign of Darius I (522–486 BC), probably a usurper (although his father, Hystaspes, is the only figure who has a name that accords with that of the sovereign who was converted by Zoroaster, another "usurper"), but extremely able both in his execution of foreign and domestic policy and in his management of the military. In fact, he is credited with unifying weights, measures, and currency according to a completely new system, and he accomplished numerous tax reforms.[5]

After quelling a series of rebellions, the new great king turned his attention once again to his empire's eastern frontiers, taking over Gandhara (present-day southeastern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan) and part of the Indus Valley.[6] Between 516 and 512 BC Darius was not successful in annexing the territory of the Scythians, who had settled in the southern portion of present-day Ukraine,[7] but he did conquer Thrace and Macedonia, thereby assuring his control over access to the Black Sea. Darius reestablished control over another particularly restless province, Ionia, but he was unable to carry out his plan to conquer all of Greece, due to the defeat inflicted on the Persian army by the Athenians and their allies at Marathon in 490 BC.[8]

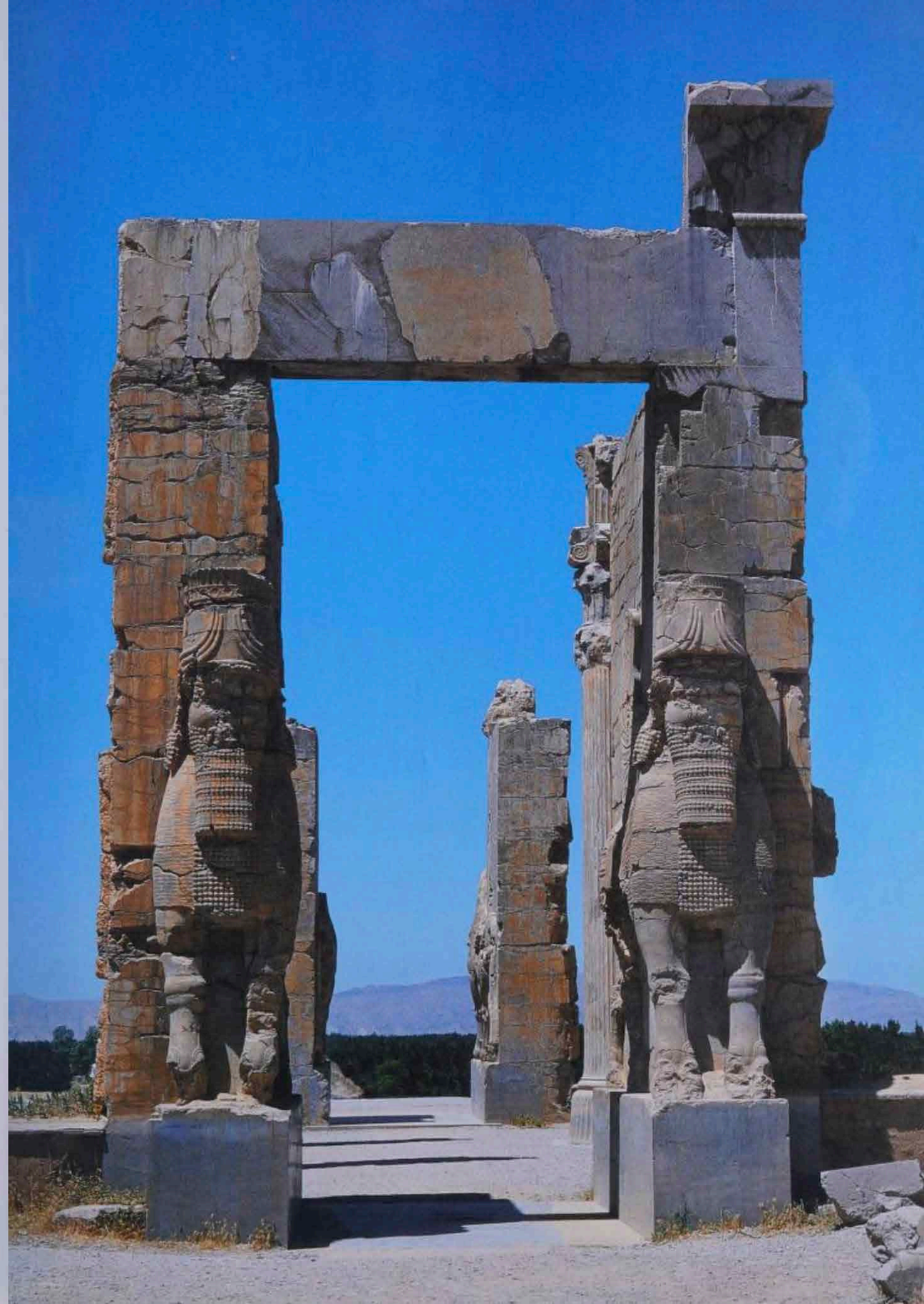
With the death of Darius, other rebellions took place in the empire, and only after order was reestablished did his successor, Xerxes I (486–465 BC), attempt to invade Greece once again. This undertaking was a failure, due to unexpected resistance by some of the Greek city-states, which were hostile to each other but exceptionally united in opposing the Achaemenid invasion. The Persians were defeated in the naval battle of Salamis and in two battles in the field, at Plataea and Mycale, and they were forced to abandon any claims to continental Greece.[9] Moreover, other rebellions broke out within the Achaemenid territories, although these had no irreparable consequences for the empire's territorial integrity.

During the reigns of Artaxerxes I (464–424 BC, known as the "Long-handed," his right hand being longer than his left); Xerxes II (424 BC); Sogdianus (423 BC); and Darius II (also known as Darius Nothus or Darius the Bastard, 423–405 BC), there were no significant events other than some rebellions, soon quelled, and Persia's indirect participation in the Peloponnesian War



11. ABOVE. Detail of the bas-relief of the Tripylon at Persepolis

12. OPPOSITE. Head of a prince from Persepolis, in lapis lazuli paste, fifth–fourth century BC, Archaeological Museum, Tehran



13–14. ABOVE. The monumental Gate of the Nations, and OPPOSITE, detail of the colossal bull figures that flank the principal gates, Persepolis

between Sparta and Athens.[10] At the time of Artaxerxes II Memnon (404–359 BC) there was an attempted rebellion by some provincial authorities,[11] working in conjunction with another member of the imperial family. Confident of support from Sparta and from some Greek mercenary contingents, Artaxerxes's brother, Cyrus, openly challenged the emperor's authority. Despite Cyrus's defeat, the empire was shaken by a great insurrection in Egypt, which succeeded in establishing its independence for approximately sixty years. Artaxerxes II Ochus (359–338 BC), the same sovereign who stifled a rebellion in Phoenicia, succeeded in reconquering the African province. Upon his death, Egypt again became independent for the entire duration of the reign of Arses (338–336 BC) and was re-annexed in 334 BC by Darius III Codommannus (336–330 BC), a sovereign who ascended the throne after years of interference by the imperial court eunuchs in events related to the imperial succession.

The new great king lacked the ability to counteract the general weakening of the empire, and his realm easily fell victim to invasion by Alexander of Macedonia (334–323 BC).[12] Alexander originally proclaimed himself the guarantor of the safety of the Hellenic world and the avenger of the past tyrannical actions at the hand of the Persians. In reality he replaced the Achaemenid emperors, conquering much of their original territory, initiating what traditionally has passed for a large-scale fusion of Greek and Iranian elements, an operation that was crucial for the history of the entire Eurasian continent, particularly in terms of art—although we have already seen reasons to question this sort of absolute predominance.

ARCHITECTURE AND SCULPTURE

As usual, one of the greatest problems to be faced with regard to the study of this specific realm of Persian civilization concerns sources. In fact, there are very few direct sources from the Achaemenid era. These are limited to a few inscriptions carved into rock in the form of edicts,

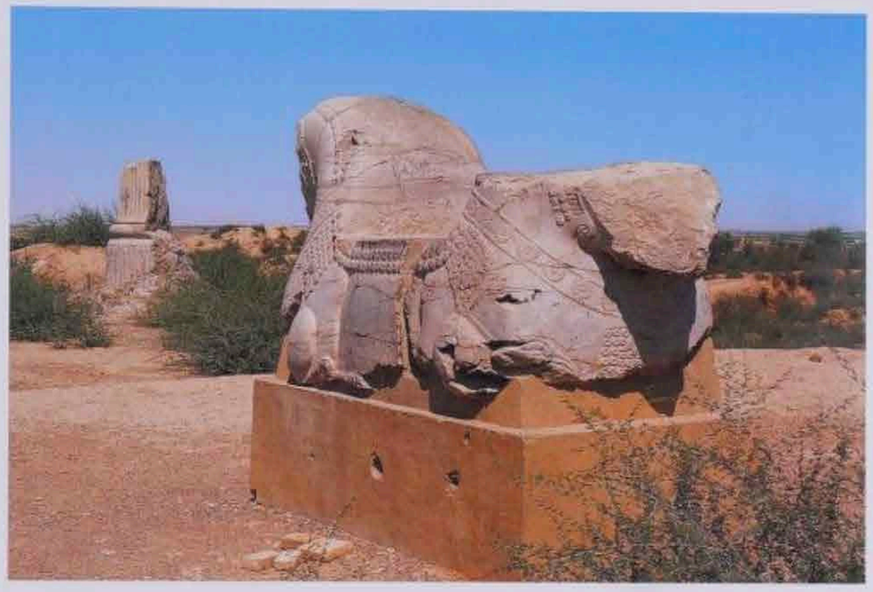
15–16. ABOVE AND OPPOSITE. Struggle between a lion and a bull, details of the decoration of the stairway of the palace of Darius at Persepolis

normally in ancient Persian, Elamic, or Babylonian (thus utilizing cuneiform characters, another westernizing feature of the culture in question). Information has also come from clay tablets from Babylonia, again written in cuneiform, or from certain monuments, and above all from papyruses discovered in Egypt, written both in ancient Egyptian and in Aramaic (the language of the imperial Achaemenid administrative offices). Greek historians clearly provide some of the most plausible evidence, although there are frequent inaccuracies due to their presumptuous attitudes toward the "barbarians."[13] This mass of information, already faulty at the source, was then subject to reinterpretation tainted by classicists' well-known prejudices.

This type of approach explains the persistence of numerous clichés: despotism, blind rage and anger, looseness of morals, the inability of the wild Darius III to deal with the overwhelming civilizing impulse that Alexander brought. In reality—as contemporary scholars such as P. Briant have sought to demonstrate[14]—a phenomenon as complex as the reign of the Achaemenid dynasty must bear in mind a series of historically verifiable facts currently available to us, nearly all of which depend on sources outside Persia itself.

In one celebrated passage, Herodotus (*Histories* 1.131) states:

> The Persians follow these customs: they are not in the habit of erecting statues, temples, and altars, and indeed they consider those who do so to be foolish; this is because, according to me, unlike the Greeks they have never believed the gods



> to have the same nature as men. Instead they are accustomed to climbing to the highest mountain summits to make sacrifices to Zeus, which is the name by which they designate the entire heavenly vault, and they sacrifice victims to honor the sun, the moon, the earth, fire, water, and the winds.

In only a few sentences, Herodotus seems to have precluded the existence of Persian architecture or religious art; this is a view that in the past has led more than one scholar to erroneous conclusions. On the other hand, one might be led to think that civic structures and monumental arts (particularly sculpture) must have had a real presence.[15]

In reality, the ancient historian was justified in his opinion to some extent. As he states in the same passage, his comments are related to his viewpoint as a Greek faced with the practices and customs evidently known to him, or even directly observed, yet always foreign. In this sense, if one understands that in comparison to a Greek temple or other Hellenic civic or funerary structures, the Persian religious building—of which archaeological traces do remain—seemed trivial.[16] The same might be said of the sculpture favored at the court of the great king (of which we have very few examples in the round, plate 12), compared to the production of the Greek city-states.

The other major problem for the current enthusiast of Persian art is the near total paralysis of pre-Islamic period archaeology in Iran.[17] All things considered, this situation is new, if one takes into account that the principal projects dealing with Iranian art, numerous only before the Islamic Revolution, were carried out with promising results for the time.[18] In this regard, the most productive periods are still the second half of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century until the 1970s, with a concentration of archaeological explorations almost exclusively around the principal centers of Achaemenid power: Pasargadae, Susa, and Persepolis. Minor centers such as Hasanlu, Tureng Tepe, and Tepe Yahya, while extremely important for the study of Achaemenid-era settlements, have not yielded finds that are even vaguely comparable.[19] Other discoveries of some significance are represented by the stone reliefs at Bisutun and the royal stone tombs at Naqsh-i Rustam, although greater interest has been aroused by the inscriptions of Darius I that are on these monuments.

17. ABOVE. The tomb of Cyrus the Great at Pasargadae

18. OPPOSITE, LEFT. Achaemenid capital reused and placed atop a column of the mosque, now destroyed, at Istakhr

19. OPPOSITE, RIGHT. Capital from the large audience hall of the palace of Darius at Susa

While Susa can boast of a glorious past, as the capital city during the Elamite era, it was only during the reign of Darius I that it recovered from the phase of decline that began with its destruction by the Assyrians, in the mid-seventh century BC. Unlike Pasargadae and Persepolis, where there is evidence of stone construction, architecture in Susa is characterized by brick, a building element inherited from earlier Mesopotamian tradition to which the conquerors adapted. In its turn, Persepolis also experienced a period of splendor dating back to the era of Darius I (plates 11, 13–16), while Pasargadae is linked to the era of Cyrus the Great (plate 17). The city would have been the first Achaemenid capital, and its principal monument is clearly represented by the mausoleum built to contain the mortal remains of the first great king. This is a massive structure built from square stone blocks, in the style of a dwelling (even equipped with a main entrance and a saddle roof), placed on a stepped platform. A similar monumental tomb was built at Takht-i Rustam (and also in Fārs), and is generally attributed to Cambyses. The models for these tombs can be found in funerary monuments from the Lydian era, frequently discovered in various sites in Anatolia.[20] The dissemination of tombs designed like dwellings demonstrates a shared style, widespread in other regions along the coast of the eastern Mediterranean, such as in Phoenicia. Various sarcophagi come from Sidon and are generally dated to the era of Achaemenid domination.[21] Among these, the so-called Alexander

Sarcophagus (c. fourth century BC), now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, clearly represents the most important example, not so much because of its uncertain attribution to the Macedonian knight, but because of its relief decoration, executed in pure Hellenistic style, that runs along the outside perimeter, where one can identify scenes of battles between the Greeks and the Persians. One detail worth mentioning is a painting executed on the inside portion of the shield of a Persian warrior. The subject, often portrayed in Hellenistic and Achaemenid art, is an audience before the great king, who is depicted seated on a throne, surrounded by various servants, and consulting with a dignitary, who stands respectfully, slightly bowed, before the sovereign.[22]

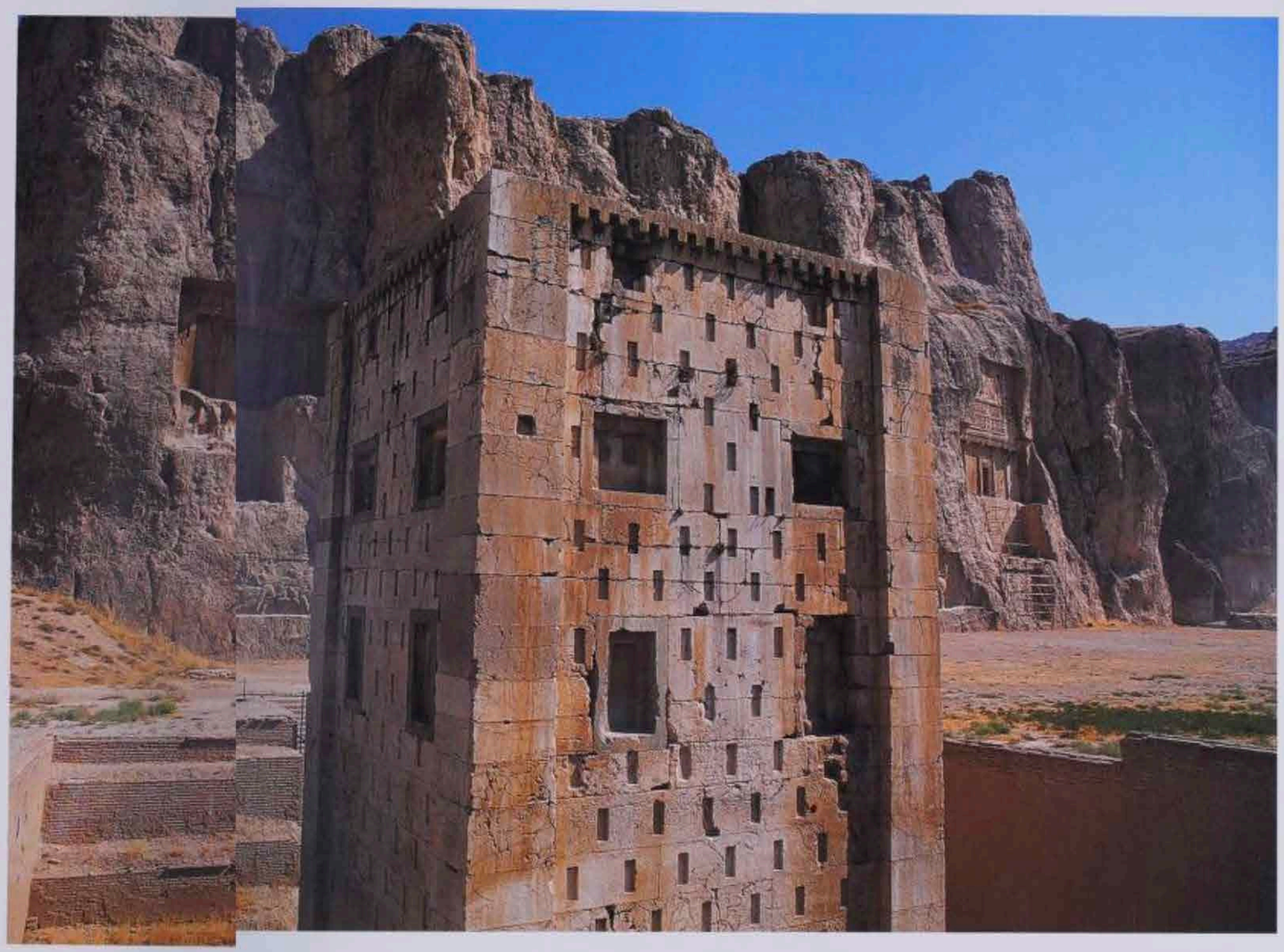
At Pasargadae a number of palaces were built on the artificial terrace that made up the citadel. Their function was linked to various aspects of imperial authority exercised by Cyrus.[23] In the palaces of Pasargadae, scholars have also identified consistent influences from the cultures of nearby populations, which were generally subjected to Achaemenid rule. These influences correspond, for the most part, to three phases related to the period of government of the principal Achaemenid sovereigns. The first can be identified in the time span from Cyrus's ascent to power to the early period of Darius's reign; the second phase runs from the later period of Darius's reign to that of Xerxes I; the third runs from the second half of the reign of Xerxes I and the beginning of the reign of Artaxerxes I to the fifth century BC.[24] Other scholars prefer a more precise subdivision;[25] however, the more simplified breakdown better lends itself to tracing the influences that came to bear on Achaemenid art and architecture, which are most evident and detectible particularly in the first two phases. If, in fact, the first phase is rich in elements borrowed from Ionian, late Babylonian, and neo-Assyrian art, the second phase reveals very close ties with Ionia and Egypt, and the last phase corresponds to the attainment of a mature Achaemenid style, imbued with original principles, the seeds of which, however, could be individuated to a slight degree in the earlier phases.[26]

20. ABOVE. Capital with griffon heads, Persepolis

21. OPPOSITE. Capital with bull heads, from the large audience hall of the palace of Artaxerxes at Susa. Musée du Louvre, Paris

22. RIGHT. Ka'ba-i Zardusht and tombs of the Achaemenid kings at Naqsh-i Rustam

23. BELOW. Marble capital discovered at Sultan Uizdag, near Nukus, Uzbekistan, fifth–fourth century BC, Nukus Museum



The Achaemenid emperors had tremendous pride in the vastness of their empire and the numerous peoples under their rule who were called upon to contribute to the celebration of their royal glory, through their experience in various fields of artistic production.

External elements absorbed by Achaemenid art included the use of the completely or partially artificial terraces, upon which vestiges of the royal palaces still stand, and a widespread use of the column, subdivided into various parts, as employed by the Greeks and Egyptians.[27] The development of the Achaemenid capital (plates 18–21), characterized by zoomorphic heads or monstrous composite creatures, can be considered a genuine creation of Persian architecture of this period, one that could be appreciated and exported throughout the empire, or even imitated in remote but highly valued regions, such as Chorasmia. One example is a marble capital discovered in the vicinity of Nukus (Uzbekistan), dated to approximately the fifth to fourth century BC,[28] executed in the local style, based on Achaemenid capitals, particularly those discovered at Persepolis (plate 23).[29]

To go back to Herodotus's statement that the Persians erected neither temples nor sculptures nor altars, we might list certain buildings of worship in the form of towers, such as the Ka'ba-i Zardusht, placed in front of the royal tombs at Naqsh-i Rustam (plate 22), as well as at least two other, much better preserved, examples in Pasargadae and Susa. At the first two sites one can also see structures identified as fire altars.[30] Whether or not a religious interpretation should be attributed to these structures is a secondary problem,[31] since what is more important is the presence at these sites of reliefs that can unquestionably be associated with portrayals of divinities and can be related to stylistic and iconographic conventions that are in abundant evidence in the Near East, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. At Bisutun, the relief that celebrates the victory of Darius I over Gaumata and other rebels is accompanied by—in addition to various inscriptions useful for attributing the entire work—a bust of a bearded man wearing a tall headpiece that emerges from a winged disk, placed in front of the Achaemenid sovereign. While scholars disagree in their interpretation of this symbol, it is evident that it is associated with a divinity, and it makes sense to propose that it is Ahuramazda. The circular element that the figure holds in its right hand would seem, instead, to be a symbol of glory granted by the god to Darius.[32] The Achaemenids indirectly adopted the iconography of the winged disk from Egyptian art. In fact, the addition of the bust, always depicted in profile, with a long beard and an object in the figure's hand, is an Assyrian concept.[33] Composite creatures, normally endowed with wings, or true putti holding a necklace, would persist at length in Iranian art, including outside Persia itself (as in Sogdiana), well beyond the Sasanian era.[34] This plausible depiction of Ahuramazda can be seen in other areas of Achaemenid art, particularly in seals.[35] An Achaemenid seal discovered in southern Russia shows a scene of adoration by a believer wearing a crown, standing before a crowned female deity atop a lion.[36] According to the authoritative opinion of John Boardman,[37] this is the goddess Anahita, depicted in conformity with a much more ancient iconography used throughout the Near East, particularly in the representation of the Hittite divinities, as early as the fourteenth through thirteenth centuries BC.[38]

The figurative language of subjugated peoples was accepted by the Persians and skillfully managed, since it offered iconographic validity that had long been known throughout the eastern Mediterranean region and functioned for the Persians' own propagandistic-celebrative ends. As far as we know with any certainty, the characteristics of Hellenistic art that are most appreciated in the modern era did not enjoy great favor among the Persians. In fact, the so-called Treasury of Persepolis also yielded statues of Greek origin, where the drapery is rendered in the classical manner but which in no way influenced the predominant style at the Achaemenid court.[39] On the other hand, it is true that certain sculptural portrayals of animals at Persepolis show obvious Greek influence,[40] and represent, along with a few other works, almost all of the Achaemenid sculpture in the round that has survived.

During this period sculptural relief was the most widespread technique chosen by the Persians. This characteristic, along with certain choices of subject matter, mirrors a direct legacy from Assyrian art, which depicted subjugated peoples—a theme also addressed by the Sumerians and the Egyptians.[41] As noted, at Bisutun there are Achaemenid reliefs with depictions of vanquished peoples, but these show a limited number of people, without much emphasis on each individual's physical features or clothing. There, the last figure tied by the hands and neck wears a long pointed hat and a garment typical of the turbulent nomadic populations that were often at war with the central government. This figure can be identified as Shunkha, the rebel king of a Sakas tribe from central Asia.[42] Other depictions of vanquished peoples appear in Egyptian monuments from the Achaemenid era, discovered along the canal built at the behest of Darius I in Egypt, or on the pedestal of a statue, also Egyptian in execution, discovered

24–25. Delegations of peoples bearing tribute, on the staircase of the large audience hall at Persepolis. ABOVE: Syrians; OPPOSITE Parthians

at Susa.[43] In these monuments, the various populations are represented by a single figure rendered in summary fashion and only in very few cases recognizable by physical features. The identification of each of these has been possible only through the inscriptions in Egyptian, quoted in a scroll beneath the various figures paying tribute.

The situation is different for the conquered peoples depicted at Persepolis and Naqsh-i Rustam, the burial site of Darius I and other emperors (plates 22, 24–25). Darius is shown at the apex of Achaemenid splendor, seated on a throne supported by thirty representatives from each of the countries that paid him tribute. Here every figure has a characteristic garment, weapon, hairstyle, or headgear, clearly distinguishing him from the others. Scholars do not agree in their identification of the various figures, which is also true of Persepolis, site of the true masterpiece of Achaemenid art that deals with this subject. The identification proposed by Tourovets seems plausible, where he provides a detailed analysis of each group.[44] Indeed, unlike other monuments at Persepolis, the figures are not depicted individually but in groups, brought into the presence of the great king, led by a figure who normally does not bear any tribute, whereas the retinue may bring one or more animals typical of their land, or the handicrafts for which each specific group apparently was known in ancient times. Usually the delegations do not bear arms, but in certain cases there are swords, bows, lances, and shields. It is possible that this apparent lack of respect before the great king, in reality, conceals a clear message of relative independence of armed populations. These people are always from the boundaries of the empire, and it is possible that the weaponry alludes also to their role as defenders of Achaemenid realms.[45]

In any case, Persepolis is by far the most representative center of Achaemenid art; this is imperial art, consciously and modernly self-assured in its taste for the varied aesthetic suggestions of the different provinces of the empire, rather than unconsciously open to confused and

hybrid acceptance. In other words, these works are more archaizing than archaic. The impression of a lucid reconciliation and an outright taste for the antiquarian, archaizing as it may be, might be termed neo-Attic, as opposed to authentically Attic, making it possible to speak of Persepolis as a sort of Hadrian's villa. According to myth, Persepolis was the off-season capital (Ecbatana being the summer capital and Susa the winter one), the site of the springtime new year, or *nauruz*. In this regard, some have observed that if the Persian calendar is truly Egyptian in origin, but with the Mesopotamian New Year, the appearance of Persepolis records this, stylistically and in wonderful fashion.[46] In folklore, Persepolis has remained "the throne of Jamshid" (Takht-e Jamshid), the Edenic sovereign who, having built his throne with the help of demons, departed at the New Year for his voyage in the heavens. The myth can be seen to correspond to Imampur,[47] while befuddled local historical memory sees Takht-e Jamshid as a memorial to a "good religion" disrupted by Alexander (a new Dahaka, perhaps for analogous reasons interpreted in another way by Islam), with a resulting flight toward India, among other places, by the artists who had created it: hence the first of the various migrations to India by followers of Mazdaism, a passage that is also a very insistent topos in the Islamic era.

As for painting, there are no significant discoveries from the Achaemenid era, although a few traces preserved at the principal sites allow us to infer that monumental painting was somewhat widespread. Greek sources from the fourth century BC also mention pictorial decorations in the temples, palaces, and even private houses of the Persians,[48] but as long as it is not possible to carry out extensive excavations in Iran, all information derived from ancient literature is destined to remain unconfirmed. Traces of ornamental painting have been brought to light at both Pasargadae and Persepolis,[49] while the only human figures come from Susa.[50] Judging from the little that remains (head fragments of figures in profile), it seems that these may be images associated with tribute bearers in procession from sculptures of the large audience hall at Persepolis, thus perfectly in keeping with other examples of monumental art from the Achaemenid era.

DECORATIVE ARTS

The study of ceramics from the pre-Islamic era still presents many unknowns compared to the reams of information related to the classical world. This is not true, however, for decorative metalwork, which seems to have been highly prized, even outside Persia itself, as attested to by coins, jewelry, and containers of Achaemenid derivation, found not only at excavation sites in the western part of the empire (above all in Anatolia),[51] but also as far away as southern Siberia, a region never conquered by the great king. It follows that relationships with these regions must have been of a commercial nature and for the most part peaceful.

In the Achaemenid era, one of the most widely disseminated ceramic articles was the *rhyton*, a type of container for liquids in the form of an animal horn, often embellished with the bust of an animal or monster, usually winged (plates 26–27). The origin of the rhyton has been pinpointed as the area of eastern Anatolia and western Iran, and the Persians can be specifically credited with its introduction to Greece.[52] A small number of ceramic objects have been found during excavations at Persepolis and Susa, but without adding up to a truly significant body of work.[53] Some interesting pieces are in various museums and private collections.[54]

However, metalwork objects may be the most compelling decorative art from the Achaemenid period. Plates in precious metals, rhyta, and vases that initially came from unknown sites

26. ABOVE. Gold *rhyton*, Riza-i Abbasi Museum, Tehran

27. OPPOSITE. Gold *rhyton* in the form of a winged lion, from Ecbatana, National Museum, Tehran

and, particularly in recent times, from clandestine excavations in Iran, are now in numerous private collections and museums.[55] Principal collections of metal objects recently discovered outside Iran include finds from Scythian tombs in Russia and southern Siberia,[56] or the treasury of Sinope (now northern Turkey).[57] As mentioned earlier, Anatolia was the region outside Iran where Achaemenid influence was strongest, even a long time after the Macedonian invasion.[58] However, Scythian art has numerous elements borrowed from Persia.[59] The famous Oxus Treasure (from southern Tajikistan, plates 28–30), in addition to numerous sculptural figurines and ornamental tablets in embossed gold, known for some time and for the most part housed in the British Museum (those depicting Magi are especially interesting),[60] now brings to mind the acquisition by the Miho Museum (Shigaraki, Japan) of other, similar small three-dimensional statues, generally identified as Zoroastrian priests (or Magi).[61]

Carved gemstones[62] and coins[63] from the Achaemenid era also constitute two groups of objects rather well known to experts. In particular, the study of carved gemstones has revealed both continuity in the use of ornamented and inscribed cylindrical seals, derived from Mesopotamian art, and a certain receptivity to themes popular in the iconography of the Greeks, the Egyptians, and Semitic populations along the Mediterranean coast, primarily the Phoenicians.[64] Achaemenid coinage displays some details borrowed from the Hellenistic world and later transmitted through Greek channels to the Parthians and the Sasanians, such as a diadem, the band tied across the forehead of the royal figure portrayed on coins. The diadem initially appeared among the insignia of Achaemenid royal power and was only later adapted by Hellenistic sovereigns.[65]

28–30. ABOVE AND OPPOSITE. Three gold objects from the Oxus treasure: a figure carrying a sheaf of branches (*barsom*), a male head, and a pitcher. British Museum, London

There are no discoveries of textiles from the Achaemenid era in Iran, and we can only make deductions from a study of the decorations on the garments of statues from the principal archaeological sites. Often these decorations are confirmed by the discovery of objects outside Persia that depict figures wearing Iranian-style dress.[66] Some fragments of textiles decorated with elements clearly borrowed from imperial Achaemenid art come from Scythian tumulus tombs (*kurgan*) excavated in southern Siberia, especially near the site of Pazyryk. Here Soviet archaeologists recovered many objects in organic materials, thanks to the penetration of water into the underground tombs shortly after burial. The water was turned into ice with the first cold spell and never melted, due to the brief Siberian summer, so it was relatively easy for archaeologists to restore the objects with the use of hot water. The textiles discovered at Pazyryk include a carpet that depicts processions of horses accompanied by human figures, very similar to scenes observed at Persepolis, and female figures, perhaps involved with officiating at a ritual in front of an altar.[67] But the most interesting find at Pazyryk is clearly the fragment of fabric showing processions of lions, very similar to those often depicted in official Achaemenid art.[68] Indeed, certain details of the musculature are rendered in Achaemenid style, that is through

the use of geometric or drop motifs distributed over the animal's body.[69] The dating recently proposed for these textiles, now commonly accepted, is the third century BC, which shows that the populations active in these regions evidently held Persian motifs in extremely high regard, even after the fall of the Achaemenid empire.[70]

As we have observed frequently in this quick analysis of Achaemenid civilization, many external artistic influences were easily adopted by the Persians. The Achaemenids proved to be receptive above all to the more highly developed cultures located west of Persis, the governmental entity that developed along the shores of the Mediterranean.[71] While at first glance this ease of adoption might lead one to think of an art generated from mixing external elements considered most suitable for expressing regality or self-celebration,[72] in fact the genesis of Achaemenid art is extremely original (as Genito has justly noted)[73] and a phenomenon unto itself, making it worthy of much more than cursory analysis. Moreover, one should not overlook the fact that the exchange or adoption of outside elements was mutual, and there are numerous examples of Iranian influence, or the acceptance of Iranian elements, on the part of nearby peoples. This process affected not only the conquered, and thus those who were more easily influenced, but also populations that were independent from the Achaemenid empire, such as the Greeks. Turning once again to one of the principal categories of Hellenic art—ceramic production—it is clear how certain forms had been accepted in Greece regardless of their barbarian origins, because they were particularly refined or simply beautiful. A similarly open attitude toward the foreign must have prevailed at the central Persian court and also at provincial administrative centers throughout the empire. Indeed, it is quite likely that these latter locations constituted a sort of outpost where exotic influences were felt before being accepted at court, and from which the lifestyle then in fashion spread first to Pasargadae, then to Persepolis.

This makes it absolutely unacceptable to maintain the despotic and tyrannical view of Achaemenid power that has been transmitted by certain types of Greek, anti-Persian propaganda. Even that view, however, is limited to a period quite close to the wars of invasion unleashed by Darius and Xerxes. Instead, the overall image of the imperial structure is one of a state not impervious to external influences, but predominantly focused on maintaining peaceful relations with conquered or neighboring regions. This points to a discrepancy with the traditional view of "antinational" philhellenism that followed—just as the myth that local artists, terrorized by Alexander, fled from Persepolis toward Buddhist India, clearly shows Iranian influence.

ARSACES
THE PARTHIANS AND TIME DENIED

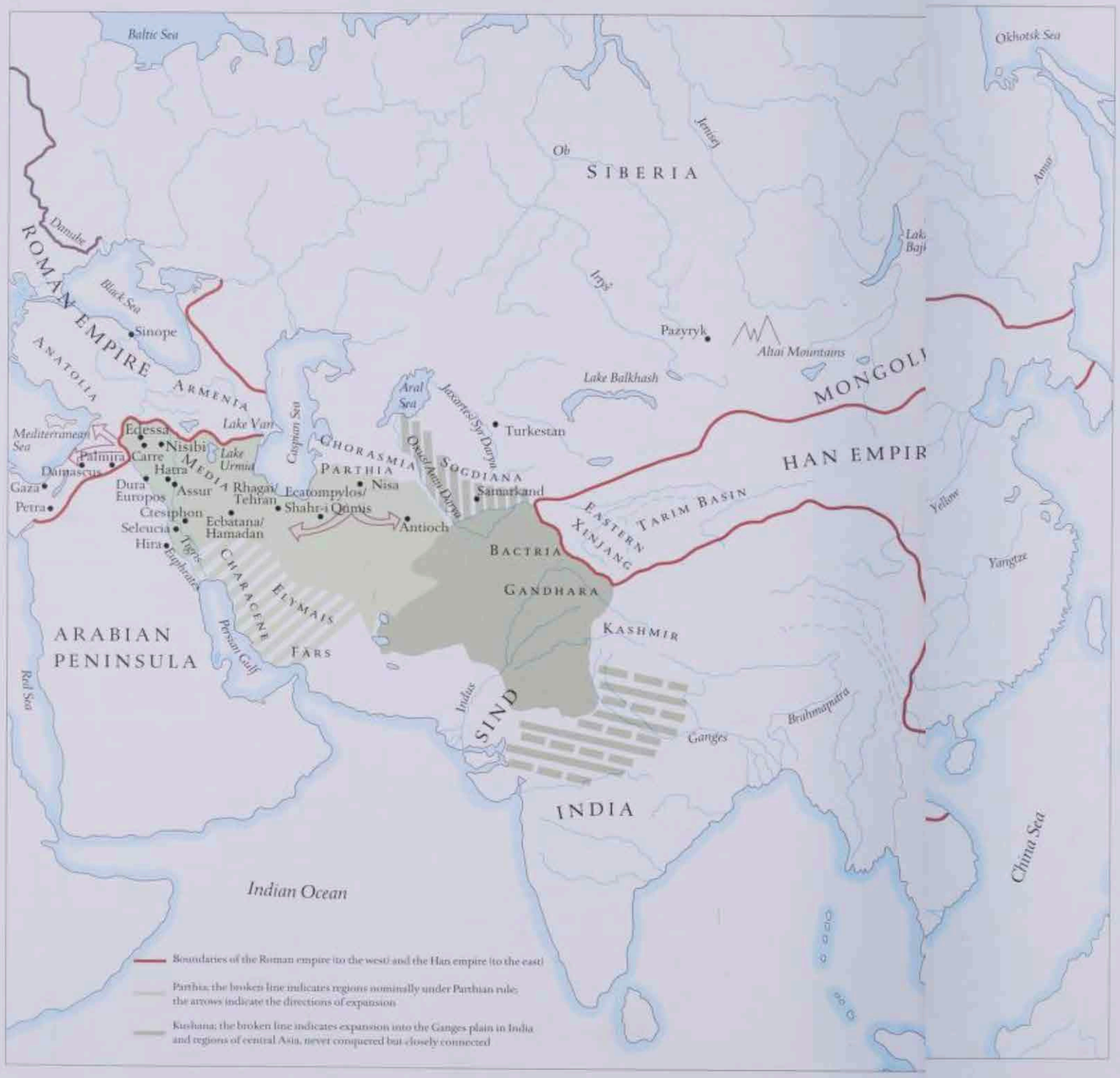
HISTORY

The Parthians' ascent to power in Iran and its neighboring regions and the long duration of their rule constitute an unusual period that was made possible by the specific political conditions in the region about a century after the death of Alexander the Great, thus about 247 BC. The situation was unique because this was not a national dynasty that took control of the plateau and Mesopotamia after the expulsion of the Seleucids, but rather another sort of group—one that had once been subjugated by the Persians.

The peoples of the Arsacid dynasty (247 BC–AD 224)—the only native-born dynasty—were more or less eastern cousins of the Persians, with whom they shared a related language, culture, and lifestyle prior to the Persians' adoption of a settled existence. Yet for more than four hundred years the Arsacids successfully overshadowed the splendors of a not-very-distant past, long relegating to the background the most obvious or natural accumulations of the Achaemenid legacy. They would pay dearly for this expropriation during the subsequent Sasanian period (AD 224–241), when the new national dynasty attempted to blot out all traces of Arsacid history, or at least to cut the duration of their rule in half. The Sasanians' attempt, however, was not successful, and the memory of a "foreign" and yet Iranian dynasty is preserved in classical sources and in those from the Islamic era.[1] But the process of erasure was more successful in the collective unconscious of Europe, and the Arsacids barely made an appearance in Western textbooks—aside from the "Parthian arrow," or the ability of the Parthian riders to shoot from horseback while facing backward, even during a retreat. This has sometimes led to an opportunity for an excursus on a period that Alessandro Bausani, breaking with the usual clichés, considered a sort of lengthening of Iranian history—that is, an interlude of successful open-mindedness that was more fertile than the archaizing contractions that preceded and followed it—that helped to develop a grand Persian culture. We agree with this approach, but without granting much credence to an equally outdated traditional view of the Achaemenids and Sasanians.

The administration of power by the Arsacids still has not been completely clarified. Numismatic study has revealed that vast regions must have enjoyed a certain autonomy, and that the Parthian sovereign seems to have been satisfied with the subjugation—completely

31. Parthia, Iran, Central Asia (revision by M. Compareti from A. Hermann, *An Historical Atlas of China*, Edinburgh 1966).



nominal in some cases—of local dynasties and collateral, often rebellious, branches of the Arsacid lineage.[2] Persia itself was one of these semiautonomous realms, forced to recognize its subordinate relationship to foreign Arsacid sovereigns, but, at the same time, custodians of national traditions.[3] The Parthian emperors assumed titles of the Achaemenid type but also defined themselves as pro-Hellenic, having just come into possession of regions that once belonged to the Seleucids, populated by Macedonian and Greek colonies. The principal cities, sites of the official mints, included Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital in Mesopotamia, Ecbatana in Media, Rhages near Tehran, Hecatompylos in northeastern Iran, and Nisaea, now located in Turkmen territory.

While agriculture and livestock breeding clearly continued to be an important factor in the economy of the Arsacid empire, commerce was the true source of wealth for the new Persian and Mesopotamian lords. The Parthians raised enormous revenues from tolls levied on merchandise passing along the caravan routes between the countries of the Mediterranean and the East, thanks to the favorable geographic position they occupied. Trade was carried out primarily over land, in part because, as noted earlier, between the first and second centuries AD (but also later in certain cases), the kingdoms in present-day southwestern Iran (Susiana, Elymais, and Fārs) were independent in practical terms, and it was in the Parthians' interest to redirect caravans into regions under their direct control.

At this time the Romans had only a vague idea of the realms that lay beyond Parthian territory and India, and they did not know about the techniques for the production of silk, the precious textile so favored by the upper classes in Rome, which was said to come from remote regions. According to a source that can be dated between the first century BC and the first century AD, a work by a Greek, Isidore of Charax (which is in present-day southern Iraq, with a small portion in southwestern Iran), the Parthians had established a series of caravan routes between Syria and the frontiers of India, specifically to allow merchants to move around with greater ease.[4] The Romans certainly were aware of this very important, if incomplete, work on the transport of goods along the easternmost routes, where the Parthians did not exercise direct control. It was not until AD 166–67 that a Roman delegation—probably unofficial, composed of merchants—reached the Chinese court of the Eastern Han kingdom (AD 25–220), traveling by sea, although the frugality of the gifts presented to the emperor aroused suspicion on the part of the authors of Chinese commentaries at the time.[5] A journey of this length by Roman subjects clearly was made possible by the friendly relationships they had with India, and in particular with the Kushana,[6] in the second century AD. In fact, the Parthians did everything possible to thwart a direct encounter between Rome and the Han empire, that is, between the major purchaser of silk and the greatest producer at the time.[7] They issued a series of false and discouraging reports, but it still proved difficult to prevent Chinese envoys from traveling. However, stirring up problems of national security by fomenting hostility between two nearby powers sufficed to stop the Romans.

The Parthians brilliantly succeeded in carrying out this task and for some time contained the advance of the Roman legions, thanks to their military technology, initially completely foreign to the Romans. The latter soon learned not to underestimate the warlike capacity of the Parthians, and above all their arrows, which were soon legendary among ancient authors and often represented in art.[8] The backbone of the Parthian army, however, was formed by their warriors, who were protected by plated armor or by coats of mail, as were their mounts.[9] These cataphract horsemen (*clibanarii* in Latin sources) severely tested the Roman armies stationed

along the Mesopotamian frontiers and forced the venerable emperors to adopt similar divisions, specifically to thwart the Parthian cavalry.[10]

Other logistical discoveries that the Romans learned about as a result of their clashes with the Arsacid armies included the use of a particular saddle equipped with high projections on which horsemen could rest during battle, ideal for compensating for the lack of stirrups (plate 32, introduced in Europe only toward the seventh century AD, probably by the Avars),[11] and the use of the camel as a means of transport, especially well suited to the desert regions of Syria and Palestine.[12] In fact, according to commentaries from the Achaemenid era at Persepolis, some delegations from central Asia presented the Persian emperor with a camel as a form of tribute. This was also true of the Bactrian and Aryan representatives, including—according to Herodotus—those who were in the same Achaemenid province as the Parthians (who, in the depictions at Persepolis, are accompanied, instead, by a magnificent horse).[13]

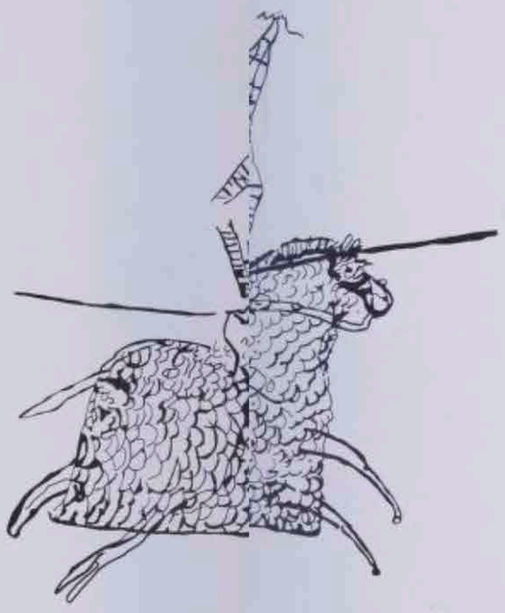
As usual, almost all available source information on the Arsacid dynasty comes from works from the Islamic era or from outside the boundaries of the Parthian empire.[14] Most of what we know about the dynasty is from Greek and Latin authors, and thus is written from a hostile point of view.[15] Useful information can also be found in Armenian documents,[16] but Chinese sources have particularly captured the attention of certain scholars in recent times.[17] In fact, the Chinese may represent the only ancient populace with which the Parthians always maintained friendly relations,[18] and it is not surprising that the first great translator and Buddhist missionary working in the Celestial Empire was, in fact, an Arsacid nobleman known as An Shigao (who died around the late second or early third century AD).[19]

A region in central Asia known as Parthava is mentioned earlier, in inscriptions of the Achaemenid sovereigns beginning in the sixth century BC, and Herodotus (fifth century BC) mentioned it, along with Chorasmia, Sogdiana, and Aria, as one of the countries that made up the sixteenth provincial territory of the Persian Empire. There is very little information regarding the people who inhabited this region, but we can hypothesize that they were a settled civilization, although their language remains completely shrouded in mystery.

Around 238 BC Parthava was invaded by nomadic people from the Dahae confederation, known to ancient authors as the Parni or the Aparni, who subsequently began a process of sedentary settlement in a region east of Irkania, around what would become their first capital, Nisaea (not far from present-day Ashkhabad). According to a commonly accepted hypothesis, the Parni spoke an eastern Iranian language, and it was shortly after they established settled communities that sources began referring to their name, now changed to Parthian.[20]

The region had already undergone a period of bloody struggles, following the death of Alexander in 323 BC, due to the inability of his successors (the Diadochi) to reach a peaceful compromise. Peithon, the governor assigned to Media in 323 BC, initiated hostilities, eliminating the legitimate provincial leader in Parthia and replacing him with his own brother. This did not meet with the approval of Seleucus Nicator (321–280 BC) or the other local provincial authorities, who banded together to drive out Peithon, forcing him to reconcile with Antigonus Cyclops (c. 384–301 BC), whose only response was to execute him.[21] This was probably the same period when Diodotus I of Bactria (c. 356–235 BC) threw off Seleucid control (c. 239 BC), and it was also when the provincial Parthian authority, Andragorus, rebelled against the central power; it was only shortly thereafter, however, that he was attacked by the Parni.[22]

The invasion of the Parni/Parthians—or the Arsacids, from the name of the dynasty founded by their leader, Arsaces I (c. 247/238–217 BC)[23]—was made possible by the serious conflict that engaged Seleucus II Callinicus (246–225 BC) both abroad, against Ptolemeic Egypt, and within his own kingdom, due to claims put forth by his brother, Antiochus Hierax. The Arsacids avoided direct conflict with Seleucus II by barricading themselves within the impervious regions of their domain, but upon the withdrawal of the Seleucids, they returned to occupy Parthia and some areas of present-day northeastern Iran, located in Comisene, the region around the site of Shahr-i Qumisj, identified with ancient Hecatompylos, near present-day Damghan.[24] The eastern region of the Seleucid empire thus seemed irremediably lost. In fact, as noted earlier, in 239 BC, Bactria also proclaimed its independence, while around 305 BC, the Indian provinces and part of Arachosia and Gedrosia had already been annexed by Chandragupta (c. 324–300 BC), the founder of the Indian empire of the Maurya (322–182 BC).



32. Charge of a *clibanarius*, graffiti from Dura Europos. From M. Rostovtzev.

The profound crisis of the Seleucids had a temporary respite with the ascension to power by Antiochus III the Great (223–186 BC). He undertook a campaign in Persia and central Asia, with the goal of crushing the numerous rebellions that had broken out in Iranian territory and restoring the kingdom of his ancestors to its ancient splendor. Known in history as the Anabasis of Antioch, this undertaking allowed him to both re-establish control over Persia and Parthia under Arsaces II (c. 217–191 BC) and draw up new treaties with the Greek-Bactrian kingdom and the Maurya. Antiochus III's series of successes was interrupted by the defeat he suffered at the hands of the Romans in Magnesia in 189 BC, after which all Seleucid claims to the east were thwarted.[25] In fact, the Parthians reopened hostilities with Phraates I (176–171 BC), and above all with his younger brother Mithridates I (171–139/138 BC), the first Parthian sovereign who minted coins with a clear reference to his total independence from the Seleucids.[26] The long reign of Mithridates I coincided with the definitive expulsion of the Seleucids from Persia and the weakening of their position in Mesopotamia. The Arsacid sovereign also turned his attention to the eastern frontier of his realm, conquering the Bactrian-Greeks and containing the threat from nomadic Iranian populations known as the Saka.[27] During this period, the territorial structure of all of central Asia was undergoing great upheavals, and a short time later (around 50 BC), the first core of the future Kushan empire would take shape in the territory of Bactria, which had been weakened by nomadic invasions and, finally, abandoned by the Greeks.

The successor to Mithridates I, Phraates II (138–127 BC), was probably the first Arsacid sovereign to permanently occupy Margiana, further consolidating the eastern boundaries of his kingdom.[28] The annexation of Margiana by the Arsacids would play a fundamental role in future developments in the religious history of Asia. In fact, the Chinese monk Zuanzang (AD 602–664), passing through central Asia between 627 and 645, referred in his memoirs to the existence of Buddhist establishments in Persia. This view should be considered with great circumspection, but it is possible that the pilgrim was referring to the eastern frontiers of the Sasanian Empire, namely Margiana, where traces of Buddhism date back to the mid-second century AD, a period corresponding to An Shigao's missionary activity.[29]

With the death of the Seleucid king Antiochus VII Sidetes, who was killed on the battlefield in 129 BC, Mithridates II (124/123–88/87 BC) permanently took over power in Mesopotamia (where the new capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, was established on the Tigris) and penetrated as far as Armenia (around 110 BC), as well as Syria, which he sacked in 93 or 92 BC and again in 88 BC. In 96 BC his delegation, led by General Orobazus, met with Sulla, who in the meantime had reached the Euphrates—the new boundary line between the two states[30]—following his first victorious battle against the King of Pontus, Mithridates VI Eupator (121–63 BC). From this point on, the desti-

nies of the two powers were closely linked, which is extraordinarily important for the study of the history of the Parthians, who in large part are known thanks to authors who were Roman subjects.[31] Around 117–115 BC the Parthians received one or more legations from Zhang Qian, envoy of the Chinese empire of the Eastern Han (202 BC–AD 9), who was based in Bactria, where he was looking for allies to join forces against the terrifying confederation of nomadic tribes known as Xiongnu. These missions apparently appeared at the Parthian court, bearing gifts for King Mithridates II, which, it is safe to presume, included a quantity of silk.[32]

The stance of the Arsacids toward Mithridates VI Eupator created something of a breach with Lucullus, who was then in Anatolia, but the result was a treaty suspending hostilities, in 69 BC. An alliance between Phraates III (71/70–58/57 BC) and Pompey in 66 BC completely restored relations, but conflict broke out once again with the expedition of the Roman triumvir, Marcus Licinius Crassus (c. 115–53 BC) against Orodes II (58/57–38 BC). Crassus was stopped in northern Mesopotamia by a well-trained army led by the Parthian general Surenas (a Latinized version of the name of a well-known Parthian clan, the Suren), and he was massacred along with his soldiers, at Carrhae (present-day Haran, in Turkey) in 53 BC.[33] For about thirty years, this battle cast a shadow over the prestige of Rome, and for some time the recently conquered eastern provinces were left undefended.[34] In fact, Syria was first attacked in 51 BC.

According to Western sources, it was at Carrhae that the Romans first saw Chinese silk, since the banners flaunted by the armies of Surenas were made from this precious fabric. It was only six years earlier, in 59 BC, that the Chinese emperor Xuandi (74–49 BC) had succeeded in subduing the desert region of the Tarim Basin (now the Chinese province of Xinjiang), expelling the Xiongnu and turning the area, which was traversed by an important branch of the Silk Route, into a Chinese protectorate. This Chinese presence encouraged the silk trade, which until then had been controlled by nomads but carried out on a very limited scale.[35] In references to relationships with the West during the early centuries of Christianity, extremely informative Chinese sources clearly mention Arsacid attempts to prevent any encounters between the Han ambassadors and Rome. They state that the Roman "kings" wanted to establish contact with China, but were always obstructed by the Parthians, who had no intention of losing their albeit minimal revenue from the silk trade.[36]

Meanwhile, in 47 BC, Caesar had penetrated Anatolia from Syria to restore order in Pontus, where the son and betrayer of Mithridates VI Eupator, Pharnaces II (63–47 BC), sought to reestablish the ancient kingdom of his famous parent, without much success. Despite many victories, Caesar was prevented from achieving his plan to conquer Parthian Iran when he was assassinated by a group of conspirators in 44 BC. The latter fled to Anatolia, where they were hunted down by the new triumvirate, led by Octavian (27 BC–AD 14) and defeated in Macedonia at Philippi (42 BC), but not before attempting to establish an alliance with Orodes II. The Arsacid king organized three powerful armies and pushed into Syria, Phoenicia, and Judea, thereby securing direct access to the Mediterranean. Since the Parthian forces were threatening the stability of all of Anatolia, Marc Antony (c. 83–30 BC)—who still had relatively good relations with Octavian—sent General Publius Ventidius Bassus (c. 85–26 BC) to the east to contain the implacable advance of the Arsacids. The Roman envoy defeated the Parthians twice between 39 and 38 BC and forced them to abandon their western positions.[37] Encouraged by his general's successes, Marc Antony also attempted to subdue the Parthians, without brilliant results. Octavian, instead, having eliminated his domestic adversaries (including, among others, two triumvirs, Marcus Emilius Lepidus and Marc Antony himself) and having assumed absolute power (29 BC), succeeded in imposing a treaty on the Arsacid king Phraates IV (38–3/2 BC) in 20 BC. On that occasion Augustus restored Rome's prestige, regaining possession of the banners that had been lost by Crassus and taking back the prisoners who were still being held by the Parthians. Moreover, some of Phraates's children were even sent to study in Rome. A new treaty was drawn up and new borders were established, although the question of succession to the throne of Armenia, a Caucasic region much sought after by both Rome and the Arsacids,[38] remained unresolved.

Yet the Parthians complied with the requests of Augustus regarding the Mesopotamian front due to their own weakened monarchy and also because of continued pressure from nomadic peoples along the eastern frontiers of their empire. But they still were not ready to renounce their influence in a region that was strategically essential for them, both for defense and for the valuable trade routes that traversed it.

The Arsacids had to be wary of the eastern threat posed by the tough and mysterious Kushan empire (50 BC–c. AD 233). Many points about the latter's history still remain unclear. Their origin is connected to the nomadic Yuezhi people (as they are called in Chinese sources), which comprised one of five principal tribes. Once they settled in the region corresponding to ancient Bactria—exhausted from earlier invasions—and joined with the local, strongly Hellenized population, they soon took over lands that had belonged to the Indo-Parthians (particularly the Gandhara), until the mid-first century AD. They then turned their attention to the fertile regions of northwestern India, taking over the entire Ganges plain.[39] Augustus received some delegations from India, and while we cannot be sure which kingdom sent them, it is likely that these were the Kushana or their allies—which certainly would have alarmed the Arsacids, who were caught in the middle.[40]

Following a period of crisis created by problems of succession and attempted interference by Rome—put into effect with the brief ascent to power by Vonones (AD 8/9), one of the sons of Phraates IV, sent to study in Rome and clearly backed by Augustus himself—Artabanus II (AD 10/11–38) ascended the throne. The Roman counterpart to this Arsacid sovereign was Tiberius (AD 14–37), a notoriously complex personality, but who nonetheless was able to intervene decisively in Armenia and in other areas of Anatolia that were constantly threatened by their proximity to the Parthian frontier. The generals sent by Tiberius had sufficient skills to muster pro-Roman support in the region for some time, but without ever achieving a true annexation of Armenia, which continued to hang in the balance between the two superpowers. The death of Artabanus II was followed by another period of domestic instability that lasted until Vologases I assumed power (AD 51–76/80). His reign was also afflicted by internal rebellions and clashes with Rome, but Vologases proved capable of maintaining control. He was able both to hold his empire together and to press Arsacid claims in Armenia, establishing peace with Nero (AD 54–68) and establishing a collateral branch of the Arsacid dynasty in this Caucasic kingdom.[41]

The successors to Vologases lacked his talents, and they were plagued by invasions from outside, rebellions by subject peoples, troubles within the royal family, and yet another war with Rome, caused by the intervention of Osroes (AD 108/109–127/128) in Armenia. Trajan (AD 98–117), evidently aware of the disastrous situation in which the Arsacids found themselves at that particular moment, wasted no time in intervening and achieving further glory for Rome. The Parthians were not in a position to offer any resistance, and the Roman forces spread into Mesopotamia as far as the Persian Gulf. The Romans conquered Ctesiphon, but did not succeed in subduing Hatra (ancient Al-Hadhr), the principal ally of the Arsacids among the

Semitic peoples in the region and an important commercial center. Subsequently, a series of revolts in the eastern portion of the vast empire forced Trajan to withdraw and abandon part of the conquered territories. On his return journey, in Cilicia, Trajan died, leaving the solution to the Parthian problem to his successor, Hadrian (AD 117–138). An extremely cultured and far-sighted individual, Hadrian restored to the Arsacids the lands that his predecessor had taken and transformed them into the provinces known as Mesopotamia and Adiabene.[42]

Hadrian preferred to concentrate on organizing the province of Armenia, establishing a lasting peace with Osroes in order to have free access to the northeastern frontiers (which were threatened by numerous other enemies), and thwarting rebellions taking place within the empire. The Arsacids found themselves in a similar situation, in that—most likely around this time, according to a Chinese source—they suffered a serious defeat at the hands of the Kushana, who at that time were governed by their most famous emperor, Kanishka, whose precise years of rule still remain unknown, although it was around the mid-second century AD.[43] Hadrian's tactics allowed a relatively long period without war, which also extended to the reign of Vologases III (AD 111/112–147/148), but was interrupted by Vologases IV (147/148–191/192), who took an aggressive approach to foreign policy, in contrast to the caution shown by Antoninus Pius (138–161). In reality, the rule of Vologases IV was ravaged not only by war with the Kushana, but also by an invasion of the Alani, who reached as far as Anatolia and into other territories under Roman authority.[44]

Vologases IV invaded Armenia and, early on, had military victories over the Roman forces stationed in the region, even sacking Syria and Cappadocia. The new Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (161–180) responded to the aggression, sending Statius Priscus to the east with the task of recovering Cappadocia and Armenia. He also sent his brother, Lucius Verus (130–169), to Syria, while a large army led by Avidius Cassius prepared a true counteroffensive. In 164–65 this latter Roman general occupied Dura Europos, Edessa, Carres, and Nisibis, and continued as far as Ctesiphon. From there he proceeded through Media, conquering all of Iran. The Parthians did not seem capable of resisting Avidius Cassius's advance, and it took a terrible plague to force the Roman army to withdraw and hurriedly make peace. The providential epidemic allowed Vologases IV to recover much of Mesopotamia, except for Osroene and other adjacent territories, which were reorganized into a Roman province, while Armenia maintained its status as a Roman protectorate.[45]

The disorders tied to succession, long a normal state of affairs among Arsacid pretenders, now afflicted the Roman Empire for some years. Between 193 and 194, four aspiring emperors (supported by their respective armies) clashed in an open civil war, from which Septimius Severus (193–211), who was the commander of the legions stationed in Pannonia, emerged victorious. The Parthians were involved in the conflict when the armies of Vologases V (191/192–207/208) pillaged the province of Roman Mesopotamia, which had been left undefended, and occupied its principal cities. Once he crossed the Euphrates, in 195, Septimius Severus retook possession of the entire region, avoiding, however, direct conflict with the Parthians because of still unquelled disorder within his own frontiers, and perhaps hoping that a rebellion that had broken out in the meantime in western Iran might halt his adversary. Not in the least discouraged, and indeed having put down the rebellion, Vologases attacked Roman Mesopotamia once again, in 198, causing a second Roman intervention that, this time, subsided only in conquered Ctesiphon. Septimius Severus then attempted to lay siege to Hatra on two occasions, but twice had to stand down, due to that city's forceful defense.

33. The Square House of the royal palace at Nisaea, Turkmenistan

Septimius Severus's successor, Caracalla (211–217), attacked the Parthians under a frivolous pretext, as he was well informed about the domestic rebellions then distracting Vologases VI (207/208–221/222 or 227/228). In fact, the Roman emperor met with initial success but was assassinated by his praetorian guards during the operations at Carres, and his successor (also a former praetorian leader), Macrinus (217–218), suffered a harsh defeat. As a result, Parthian armies poured into Roman Mesopotamia, and Macrinus was forced to pay an enormous tribute to Vologases in order to attain a peaceful settlement.[46]

Despite this unexpected success, the Arsacids entered yet another period of crisis from which they were not able to recover. Their Roman enemies, momentarily neutralized, still carried on numerous domestic rebellions, and entire regions proclaimed themselves independent, decreeing the end of the Parthian empire. Ardashīr I (224–241), a figure deeply shrouded in legend, was overlord of Persis (or Fārs, the cradle of Persian civilization and the original site of the Achaemenid dynasty). He rebelled against the Arsacids, represented by Artabanus IV (r. 213–224), and became the founder of the Sasanian dynasty (226–642). In the conflict that followed, the Parthians and their allies were defeated by the new sovereign, who quickly subjugated the entire Iranian plateau and the Kushana empire, reaching as far as central Asia and the frontiers with India. However, not even Ardashīr could prevail over Hatra (a conquest that would be left to his successor, Shāpūr I, r. 241–272), and some pockets of resistance, loyal to the Arsacids, continued to be a thorn in his side, minting their own coins for some time.[47]

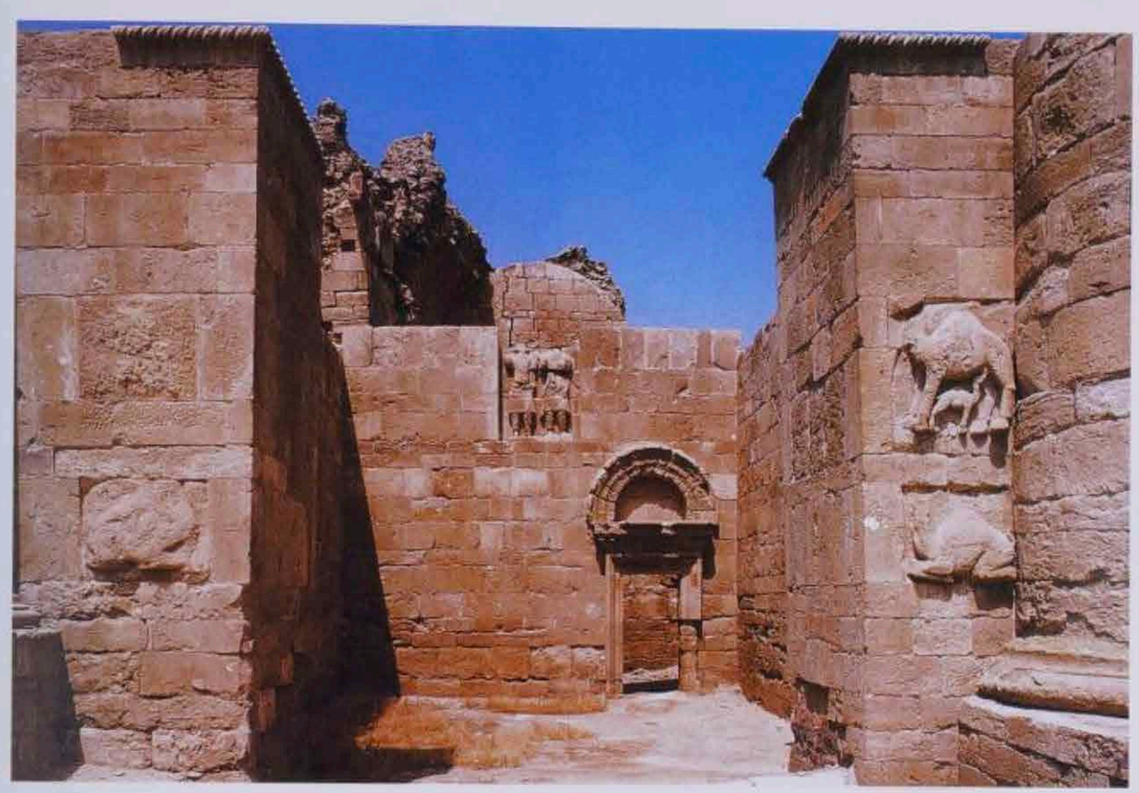
ARCHITECTURE

Archaeology has made enormous contributions to our knowledge about the Arsacid empire. The first excavations conducted in Mesopotamia occurred in the late nineteenth century—although in some cases those early excavations damaged layers from the Parthian era, which our predecessors considered less interesting than more ancient finds.[48] The pioneers of this discipline advanced a number of theories that, though partially or entirely dismissed by later discoveries, remain strongly compelling.

There was an early backlash to these studies in the central Asian regions of the Soviet Union. Not far from Ashkhabad—the present-day Turkmen capital as well as the original center of the Parthian empire—explorers and scholars realized that there must have been some misunderstanding in the formulation of the old treatises on Parthian art. This necessitated an overall evaluation based on Mesopotamian discoveries, excavations carried out within Persia itself (unfortunately few in number), and discoveries from central Asia. This approach was broadly adopted by scholars and contemporary archaeologists. The conclusions (drafted with the greatest caution and in utterly provisional fashion) allow us to understand that our knowledge of Parthian history, art, and culture is only in its initial stages, and our understanding is particularly vague for the geographic area corresponding to Iran. As noted above, better documentation exists for the regions of Mesopotamia (present-day eastern Iraq) and historical Parthia, located in what is now southern Turkmenistan.[49]

Going back to our initial observations, while we know little about Parthian artistic production, it still cannot be said that the Parthians' output was comparable to that of other ancient empires. The reason for this must be sought in the great territorial expanse of the Arsacid realm and in the consequent inclusion within those boundaries of a multiethnic and multicultural whole, inherited from the Seleucids, within the framework of tolerance or open-mindedness toward religious matters. Moreover, archaeological excavations concentrated for the most part in the western and northwestern regions of the empire had considerable impact. In Iran itself there are works that can be ascribed to the Parthian period, but these are almost exclusively stone reliefs and, less often, three-dimensional sculptures made according to a tradition well known to their Elamite ancestors.[50] Indeed, Parthian art cannot always be described in terms of defined geographic areas for certain periods of time, for some regions experienced long spells of freedom from the Arsacid yoke, and certain particular forms (above all architectural) existed in a phase of full development when the dynasty died out, thereby generating the illusion that many scientific discoveries could be attributed totally to Sasanian inspiration.[51] Many scholars, however, have taken diametrically opposed positions.[52]

This sort of geographic differentiation also corresponds to a different use of building materials. Throughout central Asia unbaked brick was widely used, while baked bricks or blocks of stone continued to be adopted in large measure in Mesopotamia and in southwestern Iran for the construction of terraces as integral parts of buildings, particularly those used for worship or royal purposes, such as at Masjid-i Sulaiman and at Bard-i Nishanda. The use of terraces is confirmed in the most ancient Mesopotamian architecture, but it was also certainly known in the Achaemenid era, where it found its loftiest manifestation in the so-called temple of Anahita, in Kengāvar in Media, which in a certain sense was a somewhat rough replica of Persepolis. Another architectural element already exploited by the Parthians, subsequently widely used by the Sasanians and also favored after Islamization, is the *iwan*, a building with a square plan, a domed roof, and an arched entrance on one side, opening onto a courtyard or garden. While some scholars have proposed Greek origins for the *iwan*, this form is noticeably different from the dominant taste of the Hellenistic era and late antiquity in the West, but was particularly favored and disseminated in Mesopotamia (at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Assur, Warqa, Abu Qubur, and Hatra, with regional variations, of course),[53] and in neighboring territories (Armenia and Syria), namely places where the principal artistic influences did not come only from the Greek experience. Although elements of Ionic entablature as well as columns and capitals belonging



34. The southern *iwan* at the temple of Allat, Hatra, with various elements of architectural decoration

mostly to the Ionic order were known in Mesopotamia—including in the monuments listed above—in Khurkha (in central Iran, not far from Qom) there are columns surmounted by interesting capitals that are the result of an encounter between the tradition established after the conquest of Alexander and contributions from the Parthian era.[54]

Dwelling further on this commingling of Iranian and Hellenistic elements, one must mention Nisaea, the ancient Parthian capital in whose artifacts one can see the hand of Greek workers called upon specifically to celebrate the glory resulting from new conquests, or the work of local artists with Hellenistic training.

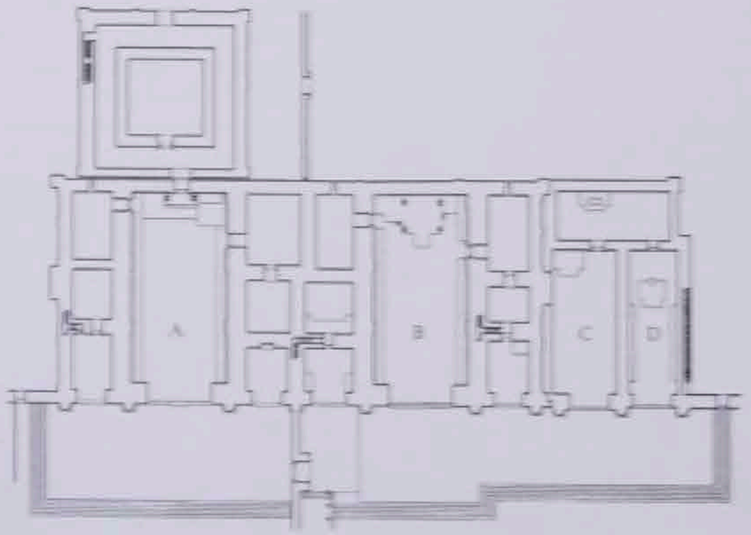
The original name of the city, discovered on one of the numerous *ostraca* (inscribed terracotta Parthian fragments, in an alphabet derived from Aramaic) was Mithradatkert, the fortress of Mithridates (probably Mithridates I). In the manner of many other central Asian cities, Nisaea was built in large part using unbaked bricks; it consisted of a lower portion surrounded by defensive walls and another portion erected on a nearby rise, which was the citadel, the administrative center. Excavations begun in the Soviet era continue today, thanks to the activity of a joint Italian-Turkmen mission.[55]

There is great indecision as to whether the first appearance of the *iwan* can be ascribed to Mesopotamia or to Nisaea—that is, to Parthia—but it is not yet possible to resolve this issue with certainty. Another matter that immediately struck the archaeologists excavating at Nisaea was the preference of the Arsacid sovereigns for themes prevalent in local and Achaemenid architecture, although modified in original fashion through the use of Hellenistic elements and the *iwan* (the tower), a structure that until recently was unknown at Nisaea but was documented at the nearby site of Mansūr-tepe. The undeniably Hellenistic element at Nisaea appears in sculpture, painting, and luxury items, judging from discoveries at the most important buildings in the city (as well as at the tower and sites known as the Round Hall, the Square Hall, and

the Square House, plate 33). These are structures for which it is difficult to establish a specific use, but which, in any case, must have been intended to celebrate the glory of the new dynasty and, by implication, to honor divinities and heroes from the past.

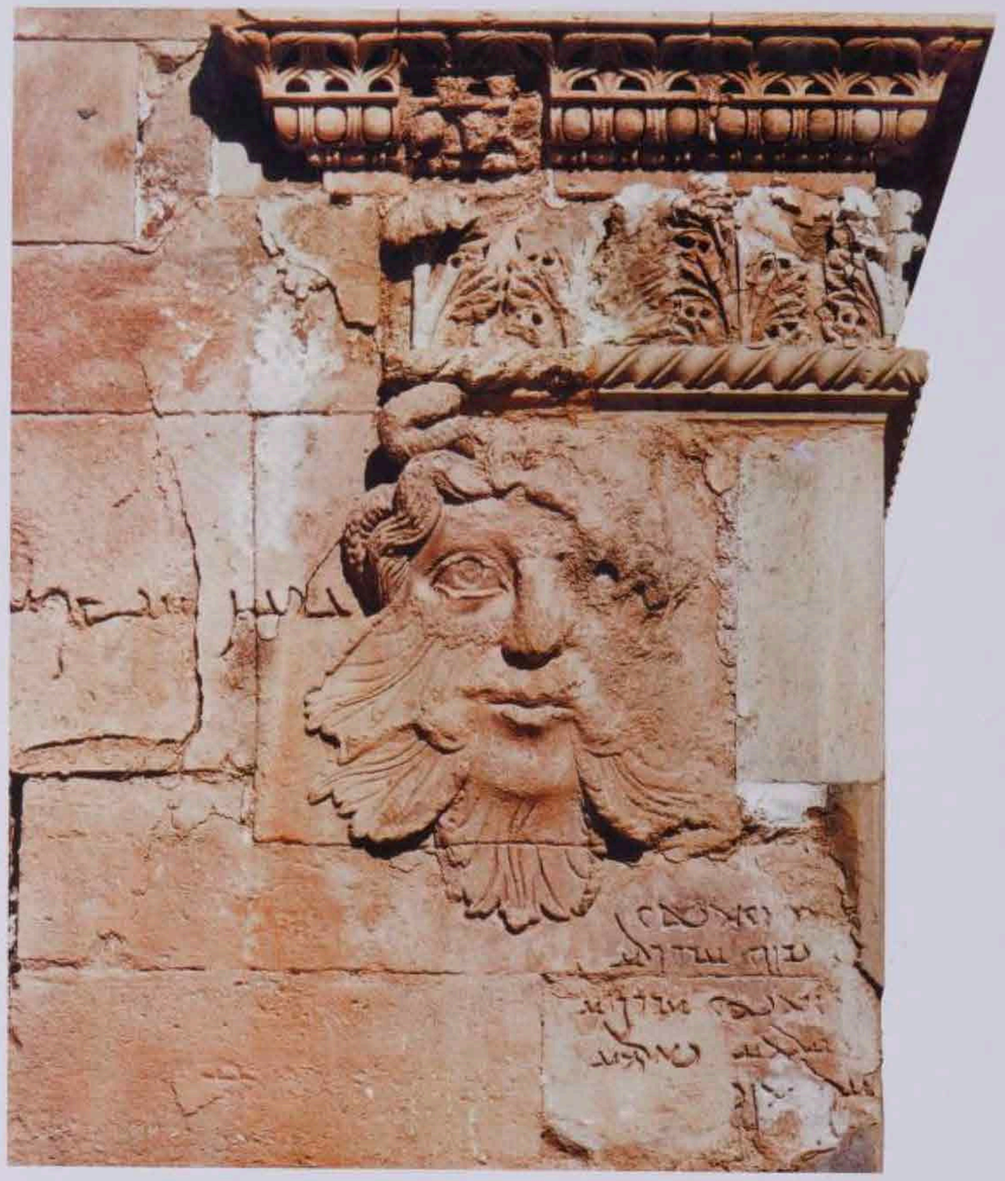
Moving westward at the expense of the Seleucids, the Arsacids established or conquered other cities, which soon were transformed into capitals, thus clarifying the true objective of their conquest: western Iran and the fertile Mesopotamian plains. Excavations at Shahr-e Qumis have not yielded much, in part because of the brief duration of the excavation campaigns (only four between the late 1960s and the early 1970s). It is not possible to add much to the early results, except that the few buildings that have been explored have revealed, in some cases, the use of domed spaces, built entirely from unbaked brick and created according to various techniques that are clearly linked to the Parthian period.

The urban plan of Nisaea fully reflects a tendency that was widespread throughout pre-Islamic central Asia. The Hippodamic-style layout also was known (particularly in the case of the Greek-founded cities that fell into the hands of the Parthians, such as Dura Europos), but there are also examples of circular plans, such as at Takht-e Suleiman (in Azerbaijan), at Marv (only for the Parthian era; the original layout was, in fact, rectangular), and above all, Hatra. This city in northern Mesopotamia was more a principal ally of the Parthian empire than an annexed city. Hatra acted as an ideal buffer state between the Arsacid and Roman realms.[39] Its citizens were Semitic in origin (Arabic and Aramaic), as were their deities and their culture, although the latter was strongly marked by Iranian influence. Hatra's economy was based largely on trade between the Roman and Parthian empires. It is said that the Romans repeatedly sought in vain to take possession of Hatra. In the early third century AD, altered political conditions in Persia pushed the city into a desperate alliance with its old Roman enemies, a futile attempt, since it was then conquered by Shāpūr I, the second king of the Sasanian dynasty.



39 BELOW. Plan of the religious complex of Iwans at Hatra. The two large iwans (A, B) are flanked on the left and right by tripartite access spaces and by two smaller iwans to the north (C, D). From the rear side of Iwan A, one enters the temple of Shamash. From M. Sourdel, Hatra, 2003

39 OPPOSITE. The facade of the large Iwan B and Iwan C at Hatra



37. Bactrian head and inscriptions, architectural decoration of the pier of the large Iwan A at Hatra

38. Investiture of the satrap Khwasak at Susa, stele, AD 215, National Museum, Tehran

Excavations at Hatra began in the early nineteenth century and were carried out first by German archaeologists, then taken over by their Iraqi colleagues. Since the site of Hatra is located in Iraq, unfortunately, all archaeological exploration is now blocked and seriously compromised, a result of the two recent conflicts that have involved and depleted that Arabic land. After the First Persian Gulf War (1990–91), an Italian mission from the University of Turin promoted a resumption of the excavations at Hatra, begun in the 1980s, in part by displaying a photographic exhibition at Turin in summer 2000 and at Naples in winter 2001–2.[37]

The original center of Hatra consists of the *temenos*, a rectangular enclosure with spaces opening toward the interior and four entrances positioned at the points of the compass, which contained the city's most significant religious structures (plates 34–36), such as the temple of the sun god (Shamash). In ancient times this was a destination for pre-Islamic Arabic pilgrims. Much of the space inside the enclosure has no large structures, since its purpose must have been simply to accommodate the pilgrims. The western portion of the *temenos*, instead, was occupied by temples in stone and unbaked brick, built on an artificial terrace. The architectural characteristics of the sacred buildings at Hatra are rooted in Mesopotamian, Greek, and Iranian traditions. The *iwan* is widely used within the *temenos*, while the religious structures discovered outside it (fourteen thus far) have features that are typical of Mesopotamian architecture from the Babylonian and Assyrian eras. The temples at Hatra were the principal goal of Iraqi restorations, while the Italian mission was also occupied with the excavation of civil structures, particularly the so-called Building A. It is highly likely that, in addition to serving as a residence for a prominent figure, this structure was used for various functions, and the discovery of religious statues leads us to believe that the inhabitants of Hatra followed domestic religious practices precisely like those of the Romans.

ARCHITECTURAL DECORATION, RELIEFS, SCULPTURES

At Hatra there is also exterior architectural decoration in stone and stucco, derived from classical art (fantastic masks, monstrous creatures, human faces and theriomorphs), although numerous reliefs refer to mythology specific to Semitic peoples (plates 37, 39). But the largest collection of stucco depictions and applications on the walls of the buildings from the Parthian era have been discovered at the fortress of Qal'e-i Yazdigard, in Iranian Kurdistan. Here too, unfortunately, the Canadian team responsible for this important discovery was not able to complete the excavation phase due to the disturbances that broke out in 1979 during the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The function of the buildings at Qal'e-i Yazdigard remains unknown, although there is reason to believe that this was both a fortress and the residence of a local lord, perhaps someone powerful enough to be considered only nominally under the rule of the Arsacid sovereign.[58] The stuccowork includes geometric, phytomorphic, and theriomorphic decorations. There are themes borrowed from the classical world (labyrinths, satyrs, other deities and nude female figures), but also figures dressed according to Parthian fashion and wearing pointed headgear. Another interesting decoration depicts a male bust with a diadem and a typically Parthian hairstyle, portrayed like a framed portrait, a style popular in Roman funerary sculpture. It is easy to understand how exchanges with the Mediterranean world carried over to the field of architectural decoration, where these influences were indeed widespread.[59] A poorly preserved frieze clearly portrays some griffins, larger in scale than the other figures of fantastic animals discovered at Qal'e-i Yazdigard, but only partially discernible because of the fragmentary condition of the stuccowork.[60] In the past, these two animals were thought to be figures of the mythical *senmurv*, a problematic composite Iranian animal that is able to navigate land, water, and air, which might have played a role as a military emblem. However, if the curled wing and coat beneath the lower jaw refer to something that may well be a common prototype, the images at Qal'e-i Yazdigard can be identified as griffins, as seen in, among other features, stucco fragments preserving a beak and a piece of a lion's tail.[61] A final decorative frieze in stucco comes from the same site and reproduces a staggered crenellation with a slit in the shape of an arrow.[62] This is another motif very common in central Asia, particularly in the architectural decoration of fortresses and defensive structures, and it is also found in an incense burner in the form of a building, discovered at Nisaea.[63]

In Parthian culture, sculpture and architecture were initially linked to Hellenistic models, and Iranian deities were depicted using typically Greek iconography, although many details remain indecipherable.[64] The sculptures at Nisaea were created from materials typical of the central Asian tradition, such as clay, and precious materials, such as marble. The marble statues of male and female deities—including Artemis, Aphrodite, and Dionysus—come from the Square House, a building perhaps originally intended for the banquets that were in fashion at Hellenistic courts, but later used to house the royal treasury.[65] According to Antonio Invernizzi, one of the discoverers of the sculptures at Nisaea and one of the greatest experts on these matters, artists must have produced such masterpieces in Parthia; thus, these would have been local sculptors whose training shows a clear dependency on Hellenistic schools, which were certainly present in Iran and central Asia after the invasion of Alexander.[66]

The Hellenistic component of the statues at Nisaea, seen in the gestures, the treatment of drapery, and the rendering of hair and other details, still would seem to disprove observations

39. BELOW. Detail with fish from architectural decoration on a door of the temple of Allat at Hatra

40. RIGHT. Stone head of Heracles, from Masgid-i Sulaiman, first century BC–AD first century. National Museum, Tehran

about the sculpture expressed by early scholars of Parthian art, who focused almost entirely on their frontality.[67] The preference for frontal depictions of royal or divine figures is borne out in Parthian art, but above all in the western territories of the Arsacid empire, where the new rulers reverted to ancient traditions. These solemnly immobile and rigid figures, with their inexpressive faces, communicated their divinity or regal nature to the predominantly Semitic peoples of Mesopotamia. Not even the naturalistic tendency of Hellenistic forms that followed the Macedonian and Greek invaders was able to weaken such a deeply rooted tradition, which the Arsacids—who were tolerant in religious matters—then adapted.[68] The same could be said of neoplatonism and gnosticism, marks of antiquity in their transition to late antiquity.

One example of stone sculpture experts have recognized as a portrayal of Mithridates I (consequently proposing the works's date around 140 BC), with later Elymaic additions, is the relief at Hung-i Nauruzi. Curiously, and despite the reference of many scholars to frontality as

43. OPPOSITE. Bronze statue of an Elymaic sovereign. Shami, first century BC–first century AD, National Museum, Tehran

a principal characteristic of Parthian art, the most ancient part of the monument is an equestrian Mithridates shown in profile—a Hellenistic choice that can be seen in other details, such as the diadem that encircles the sovereign's forehead.[69] Hung-i Naunzi is located in ancient Elymais-Susiana, a region that was long removed from Parthian domination (c. 45 BC to AD 200). Most of the stone reliefs of Elymais (and those of Tang-i Sarvak) can be attributed to local workers engaged to celebrate the glory of local sovereigns rather than Arsacid overlords.[70]

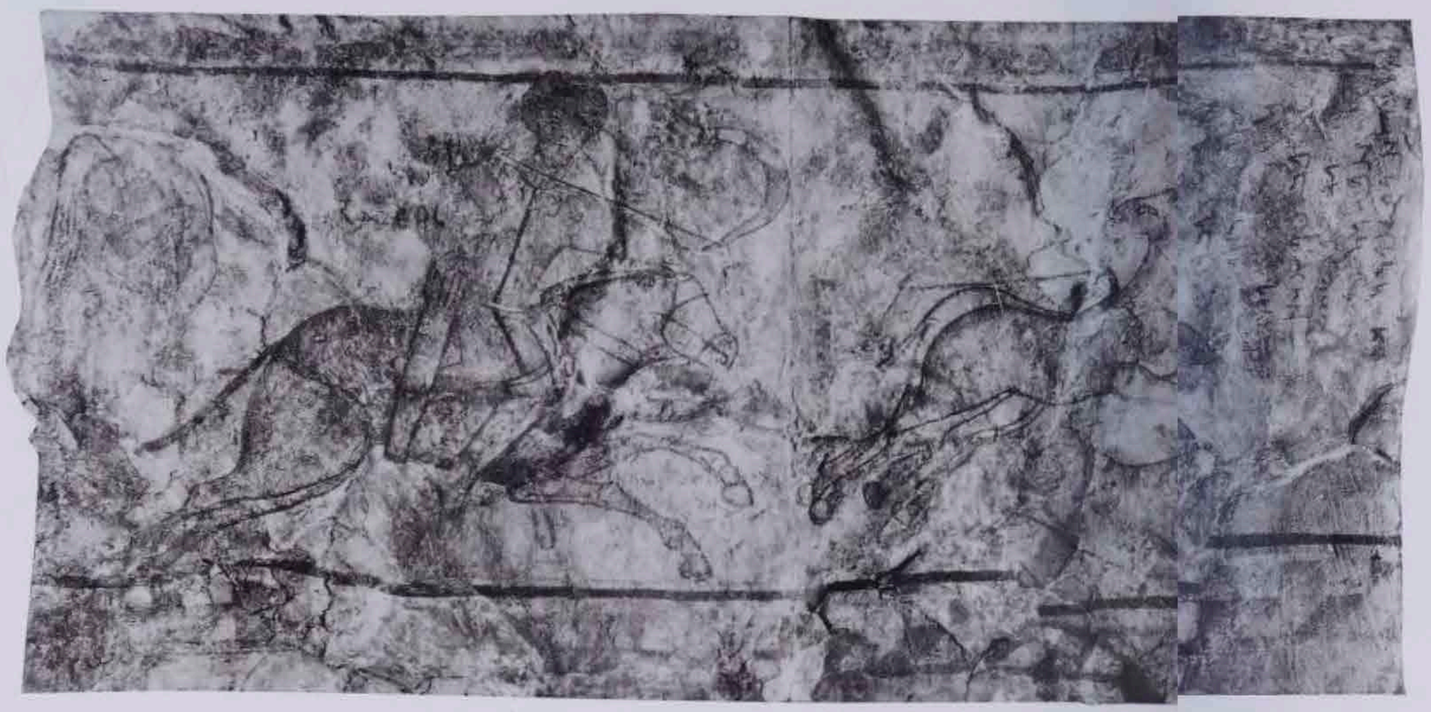
The other stone reliefs attributed to the Parthians are found at Bisutun and Sar-i Pul-i Zuhab, in western Iran, and they are often accompanied by inscriptions that are difficult to read.[71] Two of the works at Bisutun are badly damaged; in one case there is a procession of dismounted figures with an inscription in Greek in the upper portion, probably dedicated to Mithridates II, accompanied by a Winged Victory of a classical type.[72] The second relief has been interpreted as a scene of a duel between Gotarzes II (c. AD 40–51) and the usurper Meherdates, in the presence of a Winged Victory.[73] Unfortunately, the extremely fragmentary conditions of the two reliefs do not allow us to gain any other information. A massive stone, also in Bisutun, has reliefs with scenes of sacrifice opposite an altar, often interpreted as a pyre, an altar of fire associated with the Zoroastrian faithful.[74] All the human figures are represented frontally, according to a scheme often reproduced in regions influenced by Iranian art, as exemplified in the painting at Dura Europos known as the Sacrifice of Conon.[75] There is great uncertainty about the dating of the relief at Sar-i Pul-i Zuhab, like all the monuments at Bisutun, and its attribution to an Arsacid patron has been debated.[76] It is clearly in a better state of preservation than the other stone sculptures, and it includes what may be an investiture scene accompanied by an inscription, in which a crowned horseman, his body in profile and his head depicted frontally, approaches a dismounted figure with a raised right hand. It is not possible to establish whether the face of the latter was depicted frontally because the entire head has been lost. The identification of this as an investiture scene is supported in that the figure on horseback is clearly the more significant (probably an Arsacid sovereign), while the one who is dismounted might portray a local lord.

One last relief, inscribed on a stele discovered at Susa (plate 38), again shows an investiture scene with a seated, crowned figure and a second, standing figure.[77] The faces are depicted frontally, while the two exchange a disk, which probably was associated, in an Iranian context, with the investiture of a vassal by a sovereign, or that of a sovereign by a god.[78]

There are few three-dimensional sculptures from the Parthian era from Mesopotamia and Iran, and these, like the finds at Nisaea, show a certain dependency on Hellenistic models. The preferred materials were stone and, in some cases, marble, although sculptures in metal (particularly bronze) also enjoyed some popularity. Apart from a legendary lion that has always been tied to the folklore of Hamadan (plate 41), fragments of a male head, again from Hamadan (Ecbatana), and a marble head of a queen with a turreted crown and a Greek inscription,[79] the most important discoveries are those in bronze from Shami, a site in Elymais, where a building was uncovered, the function of which remains unclear.[80] There is a noteworthy life-sized statue of a male figure interpreted as a Parthian prince (plate 43), with leggings worn over a pair of puffed-up trousers and a jacket closed in a V shape, cinched at the waist by a belt to which two daggers are attached. The hairstyle is held in place by a diadem of the type used by Hellenistic monarchs (although this is an element that initially was borrowed from the Iranian world, particularly as a distinctive sign of Achaemenid sovereigns);[81] the hair frames an impassive face

41. ABOVE. Frontal detail of a lion, Ecbatana, c. 324 BC

42. BELOW. Statue of Abbu, wife of Sanatruq II, lord of Hatra, statue in situ, third century AD



with a moustache and the hint of a beard. Necklaces and earrings are also distinctive features in the royal portrayal of certain Sasanian emperors. Although this is a three-dimensional statue, it is clearly meant to be viewed frontally.

Among the notable works executed in perfect Hellenistic style is a bronze statue of Heracles, discovered at Seleucia by the Italian archaeological team. It bears a Greek inscription carved on the right groin area and a Parthian inscription on the left.[82] The importance of this piece lies in the fact that the iconography of the Greek god recurs frequently in Parthian art and, in particular, in Elymaic stone reliefs;[83] the stone at Bisutun also features a reclining Heracles. In fact, Heracles might be associated with Verethragna (which is explicitly the case at Commagene), a deity for which there probably was no specific figurative rendering in an Iranian context prior to the arrival of the Macedonians and the Greeks. However this figure has been subject to misinterpretations and incautious attributions.[84]

A large number of statues in marble or limestone, characterized by their hieratic and frontal poses, have also been found at Hatra. These are both male and female figures, often accompanied by inscriptions and identified either as kings and other representatives of the local aristocracy (plate 42), or as divinities, recognizable by their fantastic attributes, such as wings or horns. Their clothing is rendered with great fidelity and no accessory seems to have been left out, from fabric decorations to armor and jewelry.[85]

PAINTING

All examples of painting that can be ascribed to the Parthian period at Nisaea and Hatra are recent discoveries, with the exception of some painted pottery from Assur[86] and Mansūr-tepe (at the latter site there are still faint traces of wall paintings).[87] Paintings that are clearly in the Iranian manner have been found at other cities fought over by the Arsacids and the Romans as stations along trade routes. The walls of various buildings, like the hypogeum tombs of Palmyra in Syria (ancient Tadmor), have yielded depictions of figures and deities dressed in Parthian fashion, but with elements borrowed from the Greco-Roman world.[88] Likewise, at Dura Europos[89] and Edessa,[90] these two components are quite evident. In Edessa, capital of Osroes's kingdom, mosaics of frontal figures wearing caftans have been discovered. At Dura Europos graffiti have been found that relate back to Parthian or, in some cases, central Asian models (plate 44);[91] numerous buildings in Hatra also have graffiti.[92]

The paintings at Kuh-i Khagia (plate 45), in present-day Sistan, belong to a completely different tradition. We still know very little about antiquity in this region, especially in relation to the Parthian empire. Unlike the paintings discovered at Palmyra, Dura Europos, and Edessa, where there are predominantly frontal depictions of human figures or deities in the Parthian manner, at Kuh-i Khagia (the high ground that Herzfeld identified as the mountain from which the Magi witnessed the appearance of the star of Bethlehem) there is a completely original mix of Iranian and Hellenistic elements, with a preference for the reproduction of human figures in profile or foreshortened view.[93] Moreover, according to more recent studies, there are also traces of Buddhist settlements that can be ascribed to a phase preceding the Hellenistic era.

The oldest Parthian paintings (second century BC) are the very fragmentary ones discovered at Nisaea, in the so-called Tower, a building still undergoing excavation, and they continue to present certain questions.[94] They seem to have been executed in fresco, according to the Russian scholar who carried out the first investigations;[95] this would constitute a significant discovery, since the most widespread pictorial technique previously discovered in Asia was tempera. The painted frieze of the Tower of Nisaea reveals the artist's total dependence on Hellenistic models, where the subject is depicted within the framework of Iranian culture, perhaps still tied to a nomadic lifestyle. In fact, this is a battle scene where the horsemen of two opposing sides fling arrows or seek shelter behind their shields. In the lower portion, one can glimpse the remains of an animal, perhaps a lion, and a wing that belonged to a bird or to some imaginary creature.

44. Scene of a hunt of wild ass, fresco from Dura Europos, second century AD, Musée du Louvre, Paris (archival photo)

45. ABOVE, RIGHT. Two figures in profile near a turreted city, mural painting from Kuh-i Khagia, first–third century AD, National Museum, Tehran

The wall paintings at Nisaea clearly can be ascribed to a period that was fortunate for the Arsacids, in a territory they had long ago conquered, and which they thus considered their homeland, despite the population's wandering roots. Hatra has some of the painted scenes that are closest to genuinely Iranian prototypes, widely exploited during the subsequent Sasanian era to express concepts tied to the sovereign's royalty and the infallibity of his divine origins. Briefly put, once again the iconographic formulas specific to the "abominable" Arsacids would be adopted by their principal detractors without substantial modifications, apparently because they were recognized as suitable for expressing concepts that were universally comprehensible during that defined period within that specific culture. It will be worthwhile to keep in mind this observation for the study of not only Parthian art (which is anything but the barbaric output of a dynasty with nomadic origins), but also Sasanian art, which has long and narrow-mindedly been judged the only art worthy of consideration alongside the most ancient artifacts discovered in Iran—classical work from the Achaemenid era.

Paintings at Hatra were uncovered during the Italian excavation in a house referred as Building A and are dated to the third century AD, thus on the eve of the Sasanian invasion. They show equestrian hunting scenes with bows and lances, organized in vertical bands separated by vine branches that also act as a frame. The hunters are all portrayed in profile or in three-quarter view, and they do not wear armor but rather light garments, and the horses, which race at full gallop, also wear no particular protection.[96] One specific case, a boar hunting scene on the east wall of Building A, has drawn the attention of scholars because it provides the first instance of a double depiction of the animal, portrayed while struck by a horseman's lance, and already dead, in the lower portion of the composition.[97] This device alludes to the infallibility of the hunter and later, in the Sasanian era, it would be widely used in the decorations of luxury objects (particularly those in metal) that were associated with the hunting activities of the Persian emperors.[98]

DECORATIVE ARTS

Just as for the Sasanian era, there is scant documentation of ceramics from the Parthian era. Archaeologists have noted some continuity between the two periods, without great ruptures or changes in production.[99] The best-known sites are those in Mesopotamia, in part because they house the most valuable finds. These are often embellished with a green glaze, although unglazed ceramic was widely used.[100] Some recent discoveries from a necropolis near Kermān, in ancient Gedrosia, include objects of everyday use (vases, carafes, bowls, etc.), but also more elaborate forms such as *rhyta*. The *rhyton* with the bust of an animal (almost always horned) is by no means a rare occurrence in Parthian ceramics; one example is the piece from the necropolis at Damavand, not far from Tehran (plate 47).[101] Ceramics from Kermān in some cases have a red surface created by the engobe technique, using a liquid clay slip to apply decorative painting over the entire body of a vase. This find is exceptional but cannot be considered typical of Parthian ceramics, due to the specific geographic position of the region, which was open to exchanges with the principal centers of Arsacid power (Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau), but also with central Asia and India, as other objects discovered at the same necropolis attest.[102]

Experts consider the so-called pilgrim's flasks to be characteristic of ceramics from Mesopotamia in the Parthian era.[103] These are really water bottles equipped with holes on the sides

46. BELOW. Ceramic jug, from Eshkewar, first–third century AD. National Museum, Tehran

47. OPPOSITE. *Rhyton* in the shape of an ibex protome, Damavand, second–first century BC. National Museum, Tehran

of the neck through which ropes can be slipped, making them easier to carry. Flasks of this type are common among the finds discovered in China, datable to the era of the Tang dynasty (AD 618–906), but they are more likely from Sogdiana, based on their dating.[104]

The Parthians also used glazed ceramic to make sarcophagi, some examples of which have been found at Warka[105] and, very recently, at Shūshtar.[106] The latter have more interesting decoration and are better preserved; in at least one case there is a fragment of a sarcophagus with the remains of a female face.[107] The practice of burying the dead inside sarcophagi, particularly anthropomorphic ones, inevitably relates to Egyptian and Phoenician precedents, although the Jews and the Romans also used stone and marble sarcophagi (certainly not anthropomorphic, except in certain cases in the province of Egypt). Currently not much is known about funerary practices in the Parthian era. Burial practices clearly were carried out, but only future excavations at potentially illuminating sites (first and foremost Nisaea and Hecatompylos, where even royal tombs might be found)[108] will make it possible to flesh out our knowledge of religious customs and religion in general among the Parthians.

The central Asian caravan route known as the Silk Road and its branches were not a one-way street. Silk was clearly the most sought after item in the world outside China, but other products were conveyed in the opposite direction, from the west (Iran and the Mediterranean). Moreover, the central Asian nomads exported to the Han empire products typical of an economy based on livestock breeding. There was Chinese demand for luxurious and exotic articles, including glass and ceramic in particular, although wine, textiles, horses, and arms were also significant imports from western countries.[109]

From the time of the Achaemenid era, Persian metalwork was held in the highest regard and exported to the entire Mediterranean basin. We have no way of knowing what the eastern destinations for this trade were, but we can assume that the Scythian populations of central Asia were interested in acquiring sumptuary products, thus acting as a conduit between Persia and China. True Achaemenid metalwork has never been discovered in China, but some scholars have turned their attention to certain silver vases from the third century BC, discovered in central China and based, with all probability, on Achaemenid models.[110]

Our current state of knowledge does not allow us to advance major hypotheses about the exportation of metal goods in the Parthian era, but it is possible that they were included among diplomatic gifts presented to the Han emperors, and this may be the case for certain Roman silver articles found in Chinese tombs.[111]

Plates and *rhyta* in gilded silver, attributed by experts to Arsacid Persia, are not very numerous and come only from chance discoveries or clandestine excavations. Once again, the link to Hellenistic art is very strong, in terms of both subject matter and forms.[112] Of the few Parthian examples found in an archaeological dig in Georgia, at Mtskheta, the most interesting and best preserved plate has a central medallion with the image of a horse facing a pyre, perhaps datable to the first century AD. All the details of the rendering of the animal relate to Iranian prototypes: the raised front hoof and the serrated mane, the latter a characteristic of the steeds of Eurasian nomadic peoples.[113]

In the Parthian era, the most common decoration for *rhyta* seems to have been that of a feline protome, or head, depicted in a threatening stance, its jaws wide open,[114] although there is at least one case of a horse protome accompanied by vine branches.[115] A *rhyton* now in a private collection in Japan is a variation on the feline theme and depicts a lynx squeezing a rooster

48. Silver plate, second century AD, British Museum, London, no. 134963

between its claws and biting into its flesh.[116] The scene is rendered with extreme vigor, and every detail of the lynx's musculature and the rooster's plumage is conveyed scrupulously.

The most genuinely Parthian plate in this group is one in silver, now in the British Museum, probably from the second century, with an Achaemenid-style embossed decoration on the body and a central medallion containing an engraved festive scene where three figures can be identified (plate 48).[117] The main figure, in the center and reclining on some cushions propped up on a bed, has a beard and hairstyle typical of the Arsacid sovereigns. He holds a bowl, raised in his left hand, and he wears a caftan with a decorative central panel, a belt, and a necklace. His right hand rests on the shoulder of a female figure dressed in a long tunic and seated on the bed. On the opposite side, a servant holds a circular object, perhaps another container, with both hands. Here, too, the Iranian character of the scene is indisputable, and it is a type of portrayal that recurs on Sasanian and post-Sasanian metal objects, in later central Asian paintings, and in decorative metal and ceramics from the Islamic era.

Not much more is known about Parthian metalwork. A limited quantity of silverwork, which can be attributed to Parthian production, has been taken from unmonitored excavations in the ancient region of Gandhara, but these are bowls and plates that can be ascribed entirely to Hellenistic art in their forms and depicted scenes, except for some inscriptions in the *kharoshti* alphabet (used in Gandhara and in other regions of central Asia), relating to the name of the owners and the weight of the object.[118] In Nisaea too, metal objects show a strong depen-

dence on Hellenistic models, with a preference for themes from classical mythology, such as figures of divinities, centaurs, griffins, and sirens.[119]

Among the most well-known finds from the Square House at Nisaea are the famous ivory *rhyta* from the first century BC to the first century AD (plate 49).[120] Once again, the scenes that run along the edges of the *rhyta* reveal glimpses of subjects taken from the Hellenistic tradition, and some also have Greek inscriptions.[121] The end portion of the *rhyta* includes various subjects, such as protomes of human figures and imaginary creatures, clearly Hellenistic in taste, but also monstrous creatures with horns and wings borrowed from Achaemenid art. In contrast, ivory reliefs with Iranian themes have been found in Olbia (now in the Ukraine). In these, the figures wear caftans, but it is above all the hairstyles and poses that bring to mind the Parthian sovereigns depicted in certain sculptures or on various coins.[122]

As noted above, glass production within the Parthian realms must have been well developed, but only a few examples have come to light thus far: a single cup with relief work, now in the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale in Rome, can perhaps be dated between the second century BC and the second century AD (plate 50).[123] Glass vessels almost always have exterior decoration, either applied or in relief. Some bowls, discovered in the imperial storehouse of Shoso-in at Nara, Japan, date to the Sasanian era but share characteristics with Parthian glasswork, since, apparently, the demand from abroad involved a certain continuity in production.[124] Today there are collections of Iranian glass in Japan, and the objects attributed to the pre-Islamic era include, for the most part, bowls, glasses, and other small pieces.[125]

There are not many other examples of luxury goods that can be attributed to the Parthians; there are very few studies devoted to carved gems and seals,[126] and our knowledge of jewelry is primarily deduced from a study of the sculpture.[127] The almost obsessive care taken by Parthian sculptors in the rendering of textile decorations constitutes a great source of information on clothing styles, headgear, and footwear worn by the Arsacids and people in close contact with them (Elymeans, Hatrenes, Palmyrenes, etc.). Generally, the Parthians dressed like most of the sedentary and nomadic Iranian populations, with a preference for caftans made from cloaks closed in front or in a V, leather or cloth belts with worked metal buckles, and rather full trousers that fell over sturdy shoes. This was a style of dress common to people accustomed to moving about on horseback, with the addition of tall headgear (tiaras), different from the usual pointed hats of the Scythian tribes of central Asia or the Phrygian caps (*pilei*) that Rome attributed indiscriminately to all people from the East. This type of dress clearly refers to male fashion; women, instead, wore long garments in the Greek manner (or, also in the Greek manner and as far as we can infer from the sculpture, they were depicted nude).[128] Fragments of textiles discovered in archaeological contexts in Iran and attributed with some certainty to the Parthian era include a fragment of decorated wool from Germi (Iranian Azerbaijan), another from Shahr-i Qumis, with portions in silk but without ornamental elements,[129] and a few others from the coastal region of the Caspian Sea.[130] The textile from Germi has a pattern with checks, swastikas, and curving lines, typical of the Mediterranean region that had contact with the Greeks.[131] The climactic conditions of Iran normally do not allow organic materials to be preserved, and in any case no silk has been found at any excavation site from this period. In Palmyra, in Syria, at least two tombs from the second century AD have yielded fragments of silk decorated with Chinese motifs.[132] Thus, Roman sources can be considered accurate, and the lack of silk finds must be due to the scarcity of Parthian sites that have been explored in Iran.

50. RIGHT. Glass cup, Museo Nationale d'Arte Orientale, Rome

49. Ivory rhyton discovered in the Square House at Nisaea, second–first century BC

Regarding decorations, an examination of the clothing depicted on statues can convey an idea of the motifs most appreciated by the Parthians, although as frequently noted, this entails what, for the most part, was in fashion outside the actual Arsacid realm (plate 51). Plant motifs were certainly widely popular, as were rhomboidal diamond shapes containing a wide variety of subjects.[133] These probably depict embroidery or metal appliqué (so-called *bracteates*, from the name of a type of Byzantine coin that this style apparently recalled), while the frames and diamond shapes are in relief and are formed from small, closely spaced pearls.

More complex subjects have not been discovered in Iran, although some fragments of embroidered wool, datable to the first century BC and decorated with Hellenistic motifs, have been found at Noin Ula (Mongolia).[134] Two of these fragments show a group of horseman in procession and a human head, these too clearly Hellenistic in style.[135] The human head belongs to a male figure with a moustache and a diadem placed to hold down his rather long hair, a type of hairstyle that occurs in some Parthian works, but the rendering of which also recalls portraits of royal Kushana figures. Other wool fragments from Noin Ula depict plant decorations developed in vertical bands;[136] many similar pieces have been discovered at Loulan, in Chinese Turkestan, at Palmyra, and in the Crimea. In these cases too, Parthian production is considered likely.[137] Based on the knowledge we have, it is not easy to establish the origin of these fragments. A Parthian hypothesis clearly cannot be dismissed, precisely because of the Hellenistic character of the ornamentation, which was widely disseminated in the textile decoration of clothing for Arsacid sovereigns. But this does not automatically imply domestic production. In fact, textiles were the most easily transported luxury item, and so we cannot be certain that they were produced by the Parthians.[138]

COINS

It is said that the history of the Parthians is known almost exclusively through outside sources. Numismatics is the only discipline useful for tracing a plausible line of succession of the Arsacid sovereigns.[139] The official mints were located at Seleucia-Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia, Ecbatana in Media, Rhages, Hecatompylos, and Nisaea.

The coins of the Arsacid sovereigns are based on Greek or Hellenistic models in terms of the iconography on the front and back, the weight (absolutely identical to the coin types most common in the Seleucid empire, the drachma and the tetradrachma), and their inscriptions. In fact, as soon as the Parthians took over the Greek cities of Iran and Mesopotamia, they considered themselves philhellenic, and in rare cases—at the time of Phraates IV, when Augustus supported a rebellion to overthrow the legitimate sovereign—even philoroman. From the time of Artabanus II (c. 128–124 BC), the Greek character of the coins was gradually abandoned, and inscriptions in the Aramaic alphabet (the alphabet used by the Parthians with various adaptations) appeared. Two different calendars were referenced; drachmas referred to the date Arsaces I ascended to the throne (c. 247 BC), while tetradrachmas referred to the Seleucid era (312–64 BC).

The front side of coins generally depicts the sovereign's portrait in Hellenistic fashion, in profile, although there are some examples of frontal busts (including those of Artabanus II); there are also portrayals with the corners of the diadem left loose, hair flowing down the shoulders, in keeping with a scheme transmitted to the Sasanians and further developed by them. There is only one instance where a portrait of a woman appears on the front of a coin; this is Musa, wife of Phraates IV (38–32 BC), who overthrew her illustrious consort in an attempted revolt, which was bloodily put down when Artabanus II ascended to power. The backs of coins featured other subjects borrowed from the West: a Hellenistic version of Fortune, standing opposite the seated king and holding out to him an attribute of power; or an enthroned archer busy weighing his bow, a variation on the theme of Apollo trying out his bow and arrow, an image that recurs on Seleucid coins. Bronze coins of lesser value display greater freedom of subject matter and more variety, depending on the region of coinage.

The first move away from strictly Seleucid models occurred at the time of Mithridates I, when inscriptions celebrated the regal quality of the sovereign known as the Great King Arsaces. Other changes in the depiction of clothing were introduced by Artabanus I (128–124/123 BC), Mithridates II (123–88 BC), and Artabanus II, with greater stylization of the subjects on the back of the coin and an increase in inscriptions, although these are rather difficult to interpret. In fact, Parthian coins repeatedly bore the name "Arsaces," or other names that cannot always be associated with a specific king. There are some very detailed systematic studies,[140] but only for certain classes of coins, discovered in great quantity and in an archaeological context, again at the western and eastern edges of the Parthian empire (at Susa and in the historical region of Irkania). Despite the efforts of contemporary numismatists, it is clear that only a resumption of the excavations in Iranian territory will expand our knowledge of this area.

51. Armed male figures dressed in central-Asian style, Swat, Pakistan, Royal Ontario Museum, c. first–second century AD

THE DEPICTION OF THE PARTHIANS IN ROMAN MONUMENTS

In Rome contact with the Parthians brought about various changes in military technology beginning in the first century BC, in conjunction, that is, with the first clashes between the two powers, which were initially favorable to the Arsacids. In a historical-artistic context, there is also evidence of changes due to the penetration of iconographic elements that were initially extraneous to the Greco-Roman world. These were particularly significant in the third century, and not only in the eastern provinces, which were obviously more exposed to direct influences.[141]

In reality, the figure of the subjugated Parthian barbarian, kneeling before the Roman emperor or simply depicted in various compositions of an exotic nature (an Eastern exoticism, different from the Western, which was presented for the benefit of China, the other great empire in contact with the Arsacids) first appeared during the time of Augustus. The military exploits of the first Roman emperor, like his diplomatic victories, set in motion a propaganda mechanism that was used to celebrate his glory. The figure of the Parthian kneeling before a podium supporting the enthroned Caesar, or the barbarian, again kneeling, depicted in the act of handing over the Roman insignia, appears on some coins issued under Augustus. The Parthians can be identified by their dress, sometimes by their beards and hairstyles, and above all by the Phrygian cap, which in fact was an attribute of all figures of eastern peoples, real and mythical, including Anatolians, Caucasics, Iranians, and also Dacians, Thracians, and Sarmatians.

One of the first representations of a figure dressed as a Parthian is seen on the breastplate of the statue of Augustus from Prima Porta (Rome), now in the Vatican Museums.[142] On the statue's chest are various figures in relief, including one identified as Romulus, dressed as a centurion, accompanied by a wolf, his arm extended, and another wearing a crown and caftan, with a beard and long hair, holding up an insignia surmounted by an eagle. The latter figure is thought to be Mithridates I (who on some coins is portrayed wearing a crown), since as founder of the Parthian empire, he alone could be considered a true counterpart to the founder of Rome.[143] Three marble statues of kneeling Parthians, one of which is at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples, also date back to the Augustinian era; they support a pedestal on their backs, which was originally placed on the Palatine to hold a metal tripod.[144]

Finally there are figures of Parthian warriors or prisoners depicted on triumphal monuments from the second and third centuries, created at the behest of emperors to celebrate their glory. The best-preserved examples are on the great altar of Ephesus, from the time of Marcus Aurelius, and on the arch of Septimius Severus in Rome.[145] The characteristics of the clothing are always the same, at this point repeated in almost stereotypical manner, except for the appearance or absence of the beard. The temple at Cyzicus, attributed to the era of Hadrian (specifically the year 138, at the end of his reign), again in Anatolia, has a sculptural frieze that has an interesting portrayal of bearded horsemen dressed in Iranian fashion, shown in the act of fleeing, probably from the Roman legions.[146] The fleeing warriors have been interpreted as Parthians or Scythians because of certain clothing details, such as the necklaces. In fact, a very similar necklace can be seen on a sculpture at Shami, and the headgear of the Cyzicus bearded warriors recalls a sculpted head from Persis, which sports a similar pointed cap.[147] Therefore, the identification of these figures as Parthian horsemen seems plausible, although Hadrian had always sought to maintain peace on the Euphrates frontier, while there were bellicose

incidents along the northeastern borders of the empire during his reign. Once again, the indecisive identification reflects the scarcity of available information.

Reliefs from Gandhara, datable to about the second century, depict processions of figures in Iranian clothing, with a treatment of the hair and beards that is very close to the Greco-Roman rendering of eastern barbarians.[148] Although it is impossible in these reliefs to distinguish between the Kushana and possible representatives of any other Iranian population, it is interesting to note the arrangement of the figures from Buddhist Gandhara in comparison to the sculpted friezes from Palmyra and Dura Europos, which were created far earlier and in a completely pagan context.[149] Moreover, contacts between the Parthian and Kushana worlds must have taken place, as attested to by an ivory disk discovered at Hatra, the style of which recalls objects that are normally made from stone, widely disseminated in Bactria between the first century BC and the second century AD. The use of such objects, often decorated with scenes borrowed from Greek mythology, remains uncertain.[150]

To conclude with other iconographic analogies, the last depictions of a Parthian sovereign are found in two Sasanian reliefs, respectively at Naqsh-i Rustam and Firuzabad.[151] The first depicts the defeat of Artabanus IV by Ardashīr I, who unseats his foe. Likewise in the same monument, the hereditary Sasanian prince, Shāpūr, fells a minister or another aristocrat. Finally, a Persian page assaults one of the Arsacid kings. The stone monument at Firuzabad, instead, depicts the investiture of an equestrian Ardashīr I by Ahura Mazda. The two horsemen symbolically stamp on the stretched out bodies of their respective enemies: Artabanus IV and Ahriman. In the fourth century this practice of depicting the defeated enemy leaders in derisive fashion would serve as a model for those Sasanian monuments, where the humbled and defeated figure beneath the hooves of a horse or at the feet of Shāpūr II (309–379) would be replaced by no less than the body of the emperors Gordianus III and Giuliano,[152] according to a formula that was also fully exploited by Roman propaganda.

However, another and more intriguing Roman-Arsacid iconography would become the norm in depictions of homage, with costumes and ritual gestures that relate back to forms of "Persian" prostration, not to mention images of gifts sometimes presented by veiled hands to a Christian Savior, who seems like a twin of Dionysus in a mosaic at Paphos (plate 52).

Then there is the literature. Parthian origins have been attributed to some later "novels," the most interesting of which is undoubtedly the book of Budasf. In one, more specifically Parthian version, the key figure, which elsewhere is depicted as a prince who chooses the way of asceticism, is a prince tempted by asceticism, who accepts the crown in order to ensure that his people will have a just sovereign. It is a sort of synthesis between the two classical motifs, which remains a curiosity despite its timeless atmosphere.[153]

Archaeological remains on the island of Kharg in the Persian Gulf would attest to an early expansion of Christianity during the Parthian era, with a community professionally dedicated to pearl fishing.[154] This may be the source for the specific economic (though not necessarily Marxist-popular) roots for the famous so-called "Hymn of the Pearl" (a Gnostic document from the Parthian era, which would have great symbolic influence). It is contained in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas, where a young prince descends into the darkness of Lethe to take away the Pearl of the soul held prisoner among the shadows of the physical world:

52. Presentation of the infant Dionysus, triclinium of the house Aion, Nea Paphos (Cyprus), second quarter of the fourth century AD

The Hymn

(The Hymn of Judas Thomas the Apostle in the Country of the Indians)
Translated by G.R.S. Mead

When a quite little child, I was dwelling in the House of my Father's Kingdom,
And in the wealth and the glories of my Up-bringers I was delighting,
From the East, our Home, my Parents forth-sent me with journey-provision.
Indeed from the wealth of our Treasure, they bound up for me a load.
Large was it, yet was it so light that all alone I could bear it.

Gold from the Land of Beth-Ellaya, silver from Gazak the Great,
Chalcedonies of India, iris-hued [Opals?] from Kāshan.
They girt me with Adamant [also] that hath power to cut even iron.
My Glorious Robe they took off me which in their love they had wrought me,
And my Purple Mantle [also] which was woven to match with my stature.

And with me They [then] made a compact; in my heart wrote it, not to forget it:
"If thou goest down into Egypt, and thence thou bring'st the one Pearl—
"[The Pearl] that lies in the Sea, hard by the loud-breathing Serpent—
"[Then] shalt Thou put on thy Robe and thy Mantle that goeth upon it,
"And with thy Brother, Our Second, shalt thou be Heir in our Kingdom."

I left the East and went down with two Couriers (with me);
For the way was hard and dangerous, for I was young to tread it.
I traversed the borders of Maishān, the mart of the Eastern merchants,
And I reached the Land of Babel, and entered the walls of Sarbāg.
Down further I went into Egypt; and from me parted my escorts.

Straightway I went to the Serpent; near to his lodging I settled,
To take away my Pearl while he should sleep and should slumber.
Lone was I there, yea, all lonely; to my fellow-lodgers a stranger.
However I saw there a noble, from out of the Dawn-land my kinsman,
a young man fair and well favoured, Son of Grandees; he came and he joined me.

I made him my chosen companion, a comrade, for sharing my wares with.
He warned me against the Egyptians, 'gainst mixing with the unclean ones.
For I had clothed me as they were, that they might not guess I had come
From afar to take off the Pearl, and so rouse the Serpent against me. . . .

All this that now was befalling, My Parents perceived and were anxious.
It was then proclaimed in our Kingdom, that all should speed to our Gate—
Kings and Chieftains of Parthia, and of the East all the Princes.
And this is the counsel they came to: I should not be left down in Egypt.
And for me they wrote out a Letter; and to it each Noble his Name set:

"From Us—King of Kings, thy Father, and thy Mother, Queen of the Dawn-land,
"And from Our Second, thy Brother—to thee, Son, down in Egypt, Our Greeting!
"Up an arise from thy sleep, give ear to the words of Our Letter!
"Remember that thou art a King's son; see whom thou hast served in thy slavedom.
Bethink thyself of the Pearl for which thou didst journey to Egypt. . . .

On fabric of silk, in letter of red [?], with shining appearance before me [?],
Encouraging me with its guidance, with its love it was drawing me onward.
I went forth; through Sarbāg I passed; I left Bābel-land on my left hand;
And I reached unto Maishān the Great, The meeting-place of the merchants,
That lieth hard by the Sea-shore. . . .

The Glorious Robe all-bespangled with sparkling splendour of colours:
With Gold and also with Beryls, Chalcedonies, iris-hued [Opals?],
With Sards of varying colours, to match its grandeur [?], moreover, it had been completed:
With adamantine jewels all of its seams were off-fastened.
[Moreover] the King of Kings' Image was depicted entirely all o'er it;
And as with Sapphires above was it wrought in a motley of colour.

I saw that moreover all o'er it the motions of Gnosis abounding;
I saw it further was making ready as though for to speak.
I heard the sound of its Music which it whispered as it descended [?]:
"Behold him the active in deeds! For whom I was reared with my Father;
"I too have felt in myself how that with his works waxed my stature." . . .

I clothed me therewith, and ascended to the Gate of Greeting and Homage.
I bowed my head and did homage to the Glory of Him who had sent it,
Whose commands I [now] had accomplished, and who had, too, done what He'd promised.
[And there] at the Gate of His House—sons I mingled myself with His Princes;
For He had received me with gladness, and I was with Him in His Kingdom;

To whom the whole of His Servants with sweet-sounding voices sing praises. . . .
He had promised that with him to the Court of the King of Kings I should speed,
And taking with me my Pearl should with him be seen by our King.
The Hymn of Judas Thomas the Apostle, which he spake in prison, is ended.[155]

THE KHOSROW KINGS
CONTINUITY AS REINVENTION

HISTORY

While direct sources about the Sasanian Persian dynasty (224–642) are quite scarce,[1] there are contemporary accounts (although subsequent to the dynasty's fall) from outside Iran. Paradoxically, the greatest stores of information on the Sasanians come from Persia's fiercest enemies: first the Romans, then the Byzantines, through the work of authors who are not always impartial. Historians from the Islamic era have left extremely important but not always illuminating testimony. Finally, Armenian, Syrian, Georgian, and Coptic sources must be approached with caution, for they too display intolerance toward the Persians because of religious differences.[2]

Many ancient authors claimed that the first Sasanian emperor (or *shahanshah*), Ardashīr I (r. 224–241), was motivated by a desire to restore Achaemenid power, but such claims are based on conjecture derived from anti-Persian propaganda set in motion by the Romans (and perhaps the Parthians), and they are not supported by incontrovertible historiographic data.[3] It seems clear that the Sasanians harbored memories of the Macedonian invasion, judging from the negative aura attributed to the figure of Alexander in Zoroastrian literature produced during this period,[4] and consequently they must have been aware of the fracture that ensued in Persia, following the era of Hellenistic domination. Moreover, these stories emerged not only from Fārs, but also from the region of Persepolis, where ancient vestiges of Persian glory were there for all to see.

Beyond hypothetical aspirations, the Sasanians never succeeded in extending their hegemony beyond Mesopotamia and the Caucasus, which would have expanded the territory of the ancient Achaemenid kingdom, except for a brief period during the attempted invasion of the Byzantine Empire by Khosrow Parviz (r. 590–628) in the early eighth century. Nonetheless, the Sasanian domain always included a much vaster territory than present-day Iran. Its western foothills included part of present-day Iraq (where the capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, was located) and the coastal areas of today's Arab states that border the Persian Gulf, as far as Oman, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. The Caucasus regions, sought after by both the Romans and the Sasanians, were a constant source of conflict between the two powers, and these lands were often divided up in ways that were favorable to one antagonist or the other. To the east the Sasanians managed to maintain almost constant control over some portions of present-day

southern Turkmenistan (Irkania and Margiana) and western Afghanistan (Bactria-Tokharistan), and even extended their reach, perhaps nominally more than effectively, to part of present-day Uzbekistan (northern Bactria-Tokharistan) and Pakistan (Gandhara, Sindi). It does not appear that Transoxiana (the lands beyond the Oxus, including Chorasmia, Sogdiana, and Fergana) was ever really occupied by the Sasanians, although Shāpūr I (r. 241–272), in a celebrated inscription, noted it among the regions under his rule.[5] The Sasanians were able to maintain a firm hold on their vast empire (or *Eranshahr*) through the powerful Persian army, which had proved its exceptional talents, defeating, in a brief span of time on various fronts, the Parthians, the Romans, and the Kushans. In any case, in these regions outside Persia proper, artistic production, both religious and laic, reveals a common Iranian matrix, a direct emanation from and irrefutable index of the splendor and prestige of the Ctesiphon court. The Sasanians exercised direct control over the production of luxury articles (particularly metalwork and textiles, which were the items most in demand abroad). Telltale indications of Iranian culture, along with large numbers of coins, make up a significant portion of the archaeological finds in regions quite distant from the cradle of Sasanian civilization, such as Egypt, Russia, and Yemen, and can even be found in China, Korea, and Japan. However, in many cases, these articles can be ascribed not to Persia, but rather to central Asia (Sogdiana and Bactria-Tokharistan primarily), although they are characterized by elements that unquestionably derive from Sasanian art. Their attribution to central Asia can be verified as a result of recent studies and excavations, which have increased our knowledge about many of the regions in the former Soviet Union. Archaeological investigations of pre-Islamic Persia came to a halt in the 1970s, and almost all subsequent (and at times exceptional) finds that can be dated to the Sasanians are the result of chance discoveries.

With the defeat of the last Parthian sovereign, Artabanus V, in 224, Ardashīr I was assured control over the Iranian plateau (plate 53). According to recent studies, in 232–33 he had already invaded Bactria,[6] where he created a buffer state, putting a collateral branch of the imperial family in direct Sasanian control, from about 232–33 to 350.[7] Almost immediately there was conflict with Rome,[8] but the subjugation of Hatra and the eastern coastal band of the Arabian Peninsula was completed around 240, when his son and successor, Shāpūr I, was co-regent.[9]

The period of Shāpūr's rule was also marked by constant warfare with Rome over the control of Syria, Mesopotamia, and the Caucasus regions. But the principal event of his reign was the ministry of Mani (c. 217–275) and the consequent birth of a new faith that took its name, Manicheism, from him.[10] This religious philosophy, initially favored by Shāpūr, spread rapidly beyond the Sasanian realm, even after the martyrdom of its prophet, which occurred during the reign of Bahrām I (273–276). Brought to eastern Asia through the activities of Sogdian missionaries and merchants (but perhaps also nobles),[11] Manicheism even became the state religion of the Uighur Turks (744–840), in present-day Mongolia.[12] Mani's death is attributed to the Mazdean clergy's lack of tolerance for the principal religions practiced in Persia at that time. In particular, under Bahrām II (276–293), the high priest (*mobadan mobad*) Kerdir carried out a series of persecutions against the Manicheans, Jews, Christians, Mandeans, Buddhists, and Hindus, and even several heterodox sects that had arisen within Mazdeism itself.[13]

There is still heated debate regarding whether the Sasanians had what we think of as a state religion. The term Mazdeism is used to designate the religion practiced in Persia during the

53. Relief depicting the victory of Ardashīr I over Artabanus V, Firozabad, third century AD

Sasanian era, and with all likelihood it found favor at the imperial court, at least until the death of Kerdir.[14] As the name itself implies, Mazdeism centered around the figure of the god Ahura Mazda (and in this sense is a more correct term than "Zoroastrianism"), to the detriment of other deities such as Mithra and Anahita. The fact remains that the Iranian pantheon continued to be held in high regard, even by the sovereigns (for example, Narseh, r. 293–302, considered himself to have been invested with authority by Anahita), and Sasanian art also has left obvious traces of worship tied to theoretically secondary deities.[15]

With the ascent to power of Shāpūr II (r. 309–379), fate smiled on the Persians in their rivalry with Rome, but along the eastern frontier, new threats were taking shape. Recent studies of this period have shown that Shāpūr II also assumed control over the southern territories of the Kushan king,[16] although after an interval characterized by the advance of the enigmatic Chionites, he was forced to deal with the invasion of Bactria-Tokharistan by the Kidarites.[17] Thanks to reports by Ammianus Marcellinus, who wrote in Latin but came from Antioch, we know that the Chionites followed their king, Grumbates, and allied themselves with their former Sasanian enemies in the siege (forcing the surrender) of the Roman city of Amida (now Diyarbakir, Turkey) in 360. It is not clear if the Chionites' presence was due to their forced subjugation by the Sasanian army, or if it was a tactical maneuver devised by Shāpur II.[18] The Kidarites replaced the Chionites, but they in turn were ousted in Bactria by the powerful (and "Iranianized") Ephtalites, beginning in 456. After being restrained by Bahrām V Gor (r. 421–439)—famous, at least in legend and folklore, not only for his skills as a warrior, but also for his hunting exploits—the Ephtalites, as early as 442, began to present a serious threat to Yazdegerd II (r. 439–457) and his successors, until just after the mid-sixth century.[19] In 384 the threat

54. Combat of Hormizd II (302-309), Naqsh-i Rustam, fourth century AD

55. Equestrian battle scenes, Naqsh-i Rustam

presented by the turbulent nomadic populations of central Asia had convinced Theodosius I (379–395) to grant regular payments to the Sasanians for control over the mountain passes used by the barbarians for their incursions into both Persian and Roman territories.[20]

Hormizd III (r. 457–459), son of Yazdegerd II, had to cede the throne to his younger brother, Firūz I (r. 459–484), who was backed by the Ephtalites. Relations between Firūz and the Ephtalites, however, soon deteriorated, and during the war that ensued, the Sasanian emperor himself was taken prisoner. The Ephtalites requested a heavy tribute in silver for the emperor's release, and the son of Firūz, Kavadh, was held hostage at the Ephtalite court. Despite these extremely harsh conditions, Firūz once again declared war on the Ephtalites and died in battle. Through shrewd maneuvering on the part of the Ephtalite monarch (probably Akhshunvar, mentioned in Arabic sources),[21] after a brief interregnum by Balash (r. 484–488), Kavadh I (r. 488–497) ascended the throne of Persia. He enjoyed excellent relations with the Ephtalites, having married one of their princesses, and he lived among them for some time during his captivity. Forced into exile by a revolt led by Mazdak, Kavadh once again resorted to Ephtalite support, and he not only recaptured the throne (definitively thwarting rebellions between 528 and 529), but also, with his central Asian allies, lashed out against Byzantium, which at that point paid tribute to Persia, as Rome had done before, at the time of Theodosius.[22] At the height of their power the Ephtalites controlled an enormous territory that stretched from Persia to the Tarim Basin (present-day western China), passing though northwestern India (Gandhara and Kashmir), and they could count on the enormous riches extorted from the Sasanians or accumulated with the help of Sogdian trade routes to the east, which they oversaw.[23]

This interference into the internal affairs of Persia and Sasanian allegiance to the Ephtalites changed completely with the ascent to the throne of Khosrow Anūshīrvan I (r. 531–579), who ushered in the golden era of Sasanian rule and became the greatest antagonist of the Byzantine emperor Justinian (r. 527–565). Through a series of political-administrative and military reforms, the first Khosrow king managed to lay the foundation for a cohesive state, further reinforced by incursions into Byzantine territory and by the enormous payments extracted from Justinian. In the meantime Justinian was engaged in taking back the Mediterranean basin from barbarian Europe and was thus eager to end hostilities with the Persians, even in less than honorable fashion.

In 552 a new power, the Turks, appeared on the central Asian stage, once again disrupting the fragile balance of the region. They eliminated the Ephtalites's major eastern allies and thus made the former vulnerable to attack.[24] Quickly taking advantage of the situation, Khosrow forged an alliance with the newcomers, and around 560 the Ephtalite kingdom was completely destroyed and divided up between the two victors. The Persians took Bactria-Tokharistan, with part of the Indian territories, and the Turks took Transoxiana and the eastern domains.[25] Probably because of problems connected to the free movement of Sogdian merchants—now Turkish subjects—within Sasanian territory, the two former allies clashed, and the lands once assigned to the Persians passed to the Turks.[26] Nonetheless, Khosrow managed to maintain firm control over the Sasanian segment of the caravan route, commonly known as the Silk Route, and he established supremacy over trade in the Indian Ocean. This was part of a much larger plan to prevent the Byzantines from acquiring sumptuary products originating in India and China from Turkish-Sogdian merchants.[27] However, the merchants managed in part to get around this obstacle, opening up new trade routes.[28] The Byzantines, forced to pay exorbitant prices for exotic goods, thanks to tolls levied by the Persians, attracted many of the Turkish-Sogdian missions, which reached Constantinople through the Caucasus mountain passes. Moreover,

56. ABOVE, LEFT. The equestrian statue of the large grotto at Taq-i Bustan

57. ABOVE. The bridge of Shahristan at Esfahān, with a Sasanian foundation

they attempted to boycott the sea routes monopolized by Khosrow, pushing the Christian Aksumites (the Abyssinians) to conquer Yemen, an obligatory transit point for traffic moving toward Byzantine Egypt. The reaction was swift, and around 570 a Sasanian expedition—probably naval—seized Yemen from the Aksumites, transforming it into a new province.[29] Sasanian power was at its height, but its territorial expansion continued with the annexations carried out by Khosrow's successors. Toward the end of his reign, Hormizd IV (r. 579–590) succeeded in defeating the Turks in central Asia, with the help of his brilliant general, Bahrām Chūbīn. But a disagreement between the two men led to a military rebellion, followed by a palace revolt, and Bahrām assumed power as Bahrām VI (r. 590–591), forcing the legitimate sovereign, Khosrow Parviz, into exile. The second Khosrow sought refuge from the Byzantine emperor Maurice (582–602), who benevolently agreed, despite the wars that had been conducted against the Sasanians at the time of Hormizd IV. Maurice granted Khosrow Parviz an army, made up in part of Persian prisoners who were pardoned in order to overthrow the usurper, and also (according to an unlikely tradition) gave him one of his daughters as a wife. Having defeated Bahrām (who, however, was portrayed in complimentary fashion in a "novel" with somewhat questionable pedigree, popular in the period spanning the Sasanian and Islamic eras), Khosrow Parviz inaugurated a brief era of exceptionally good relationships with Byzantium,[30] traces of which can also be seen in the artwork produced under the two ancient adversaries.

Subsequent political disturbances—which altered this peaceful state of affairs between the two powers, as well as the entire organization of the Near East in late antiquity—arose within the Byzantine Empire when the rebel general, Phocas (r. 602–610), seized the throne, massacring Maurice and his family. Khosrow II, perhaps truly indignant about the dreadful end of his benefactor and "adoptive father," intervened to support the Byzantines, who opposed Phocas. However, once the usurper was eliminated, Khosrow refused to recognize Heraclius (r. 610–641) as the legitimate Byzantine emperor, and a vast invasion of the Byzantine Empire ensued. Within a few years the Persian advance led to Khosrow's conquest of Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and part of Anatolia, culminating in the siege of Constantinople while working with the Avars and the Slavs.[31] For his part, Heraclius, supported by the Khazars, attacked the Sasanian Empire from the Caucasus front, pillaging and destroying almost as far as the gates of Ctesiphon. Wishing to regain the privileges that their emperor had revoked and backed by generals whose armies were depleted and cowed by Byzantine successes, the Persian nobility supported the removal and assassination of Khosrow II by his son and successor, Kavadh II Shiroe (628). From this point on, the Sasanian Empire entered an extremely confused period, during which a series of rulers (sometimes women) followed one after another within the span of a few years until the Islamic invasion.

There were various reasons for the fall of the Sasanians to Arab forces (including perhaps religious causes, namely the Sasanian relationship to Christianity), but certainly the prolonged and drawn-out war against Byzantium must have been a drain on their resources and those of all of Persia. Moreover, Khosrow II's ill-considered annexation in 602 of the vassal state of Lakhmidi (in present-day southern Iraq) had deprived the Sasanians of a possible buffer zone in case of clashes with Bedouin tribes, even though early signs of this danger, apparently overlooked by Persian strategists, had been sensed when the Sasanians suffered a defeat by the

58. The lake and temple of fire at Takht-i Sulaiman, sixth century and later

59. *Chahar taq* at Jirra (Fārs)

Arabs. The last Sasanian emperor, Yazdegerd III (r. 632–651), futilely attempted to free his kingdom from its fate by vigorously resisting the Arab invaders. Once the Sasanian general Rustam was killed at the battle of al-Qadisiya in 636, the Arab armies spread throughout Persia, and in 642 at the battle of Nahavand they defeated Yazdegerd, forcing him to flee into the eastern regions of his territory. There, in the vicinity of Marv, he died, probably assassinated; in keeping with tradition, the Nestorian bishop officiated at his funeral.[32]

This latter, seemingly insignificant detail is in fact revealing and agrees with a series of recent studies regarding the late Sasanians' relationship to the Christians. It would appear that Khosrow II had initiated overtures toward Christianity, at least at the beginning of his reign,[33] and some of his successors openly favored the new religion.[34] Even after the fall of the Sasanian dynasty this attitude continued among its last representatives, who were exiled to the Chinese court, if we are to believe a request Firūz III (r. c. 630–678), son of Yazdegerd III, put to the Tang Emperor: permission to build a Nestorian church in Chang'an.[35]

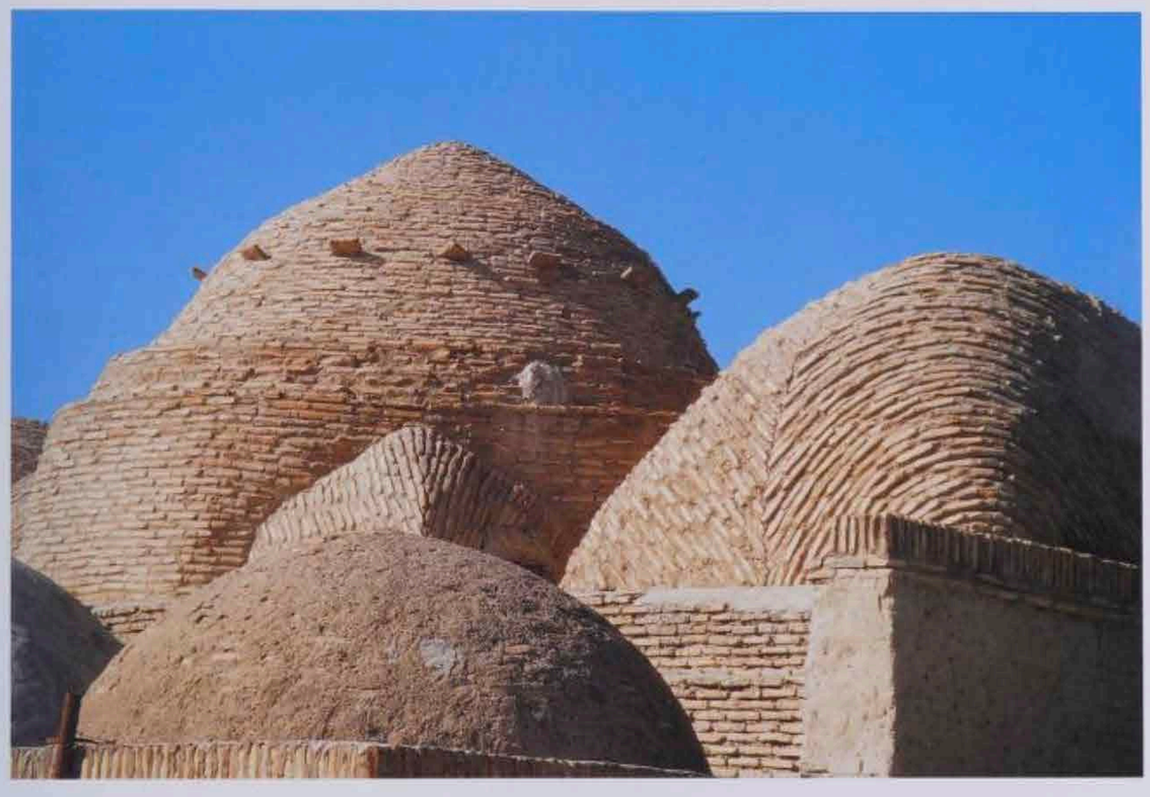
Firūz III is not the last Sasanian descendent about whom we have information. Chinese and, in some cases, Islamic sources mention bellicose activity in Tokharistan, where losses were suffered by the Omayyad caliphate (661–750) and the descendents of Yazdegerd III received Chinese support or help from local Turkish potentates intolerant of Arab domination.[36] These attempts did not affect Umayyad power in Persia or impede the Islamization of that country, which experienced a period of renewed splendor on the Iranian plateau.

SASANIAN ARCHITECTURE

Artistic production from the Sasanian era by no means represents a clear break with the previous period (plate 57). As the last two decades of intense research have ascertained, certain iconographic formulas characteristic of Sasanian art, which were once considered an authentic contribution by that culture, in fact date back to older traditions, not only Mesopotamian-Achaemenid, but also Parthian-Arsacid.[37] Unexpected favor in exclusive court circles clearly came from outside elements which are theoretically irreconcilable with a dominant class that was perennially hostile to its neighbors from both west and east. Thus, at Taq-i Bustan there are classicizing mosaics in the palace of Shāpūr I, or figures arranged like sacred images, more in keeping with the apse decoration typical of a Christian church, of people dressed in caftans in central Asian style, again at Taq-i Bustan. Scholars have opposing opinions regarding the appearance of new tendencies in Sasanian decorative metalwork, beginning in the sixth century, which could be attributed to influences from outside Persia.[38] In all these cases, however, the work has an indisputable Iranian character, which is also true of works that are considered the result of the handiwork of prisoners of war from the Roman Empire.

The subject matter of Sasanian art most often comes from the secular sphere, although it deals almost exclusively with themes meant to celebrate the infallibility of the *shahanshah* and the sovereignty granted to the emperor by a god or—less frequently—a goddess (plate 73). Triumphal monuments are well known (particularly carved stone sculpture, although an exquisitely crafted cameo also stands out), depicting Sasanian victories over Iran's enemies (plates 54–56), almost always personified in the figure of a Roman emperor humbled before the *shahanshah* or trampled by his steed.[39]

Genres normally considered "minor" to Western eyes (stucco decoration, textiles, carved gems, etc.) also deserve our attention, and most recent scholarly contributions are the result



of explorations in this direction. Decorative metalwork, in any case, requires a separate discussion. While many scholars have focused on themes specific to Sasanian iconography, they have neglected other discoveries (now considerable in quantity), despite their uniqueness and splendor.

It is more than credible that the work of poets and ballad singers active at court and in the service of local governors made a significant contribution to the figurative arts, which is precisely what seems to have occurred in nearby Sogdiana.[40] Scholars have agreed on Sasanian attribution for early versions of literary works in various genres, some of which were intended as pure entertainment for the upper and cultivated classes.[41] For instance, the exploits of Bahrām V Gor and the handmaiden Azada are immortalized in many works from the Islamic era but were certainly already known to the Sasanians, as attested to in metalwork and seals.[42] Unfortunately, unlike Chinese Turkistan, the climate in Persia does not favor the preservation of discoveries of organic origin, making it impossible to recover fragments of such literary works or illuminated texts, which would have been held in extremely high regard by Mani, himself a "painter."

Persian architecture represents a unique case, unlike other regions of the Near East because early explorers focused not on religious buildings, such as the so-called fire temples (plate 58),

60. Building with a quadrangular structure and dome at Kunar Siyah

61. External manifestation of the four corner pendentives at Degaran. Compare with the building of Kunar Siyah (OPPOSITE)

62. OVERLEAF. Qal'a-yi Dukhtar, palace of Ardashīr I at Firozabad, third century AD

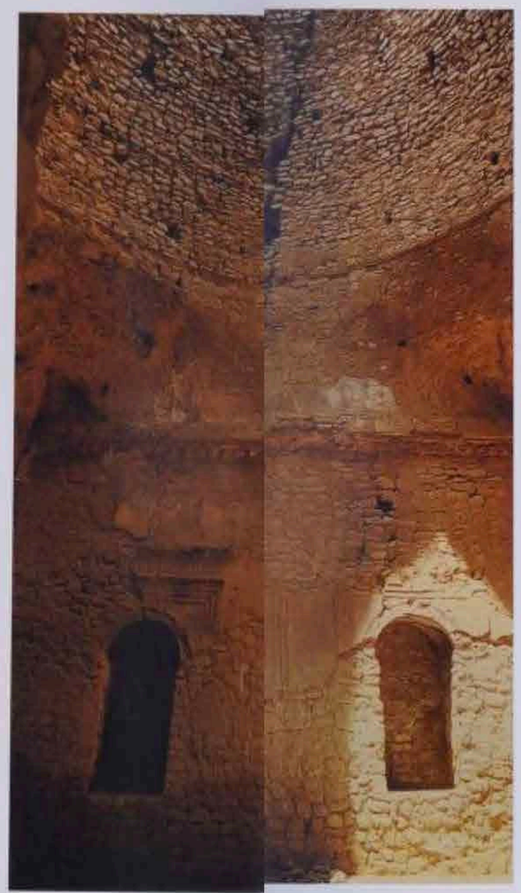
but instead on royal palaces and structures designed to celebrate the ruling class. Many remains of buildings initially considered places of worship are now viewed with some caution by experts, who do not deny the possibility that these structures were destined for other uses. The definition of the fire temple derives from a now discredited romantic view of the nature of Persian religion presented in the principally Islamic sources on the Sasanian era. Unfortunately, the only religious structures analyzed using this criterion are at Turang Tepe (eighth century) and Takht-i Sulaiman (fourth–sixth century). Most of the extant buildings—above all, those of the *chahar taq* type (domed, with a square plan and arched facades on all sides, plate 59), once considered typical of the Zoroastrian "temple"—have proved to be part of much more complicated structures, no longer in existence. The most superb examples known today are undoubtedly those of Kunar Siyah (plate 60), on the ancient caravan route that descended from Firozabad to the Persian Gulf, where a series of niches crown the foundation cube upon which the dome rests: an obvious prototype for the mausoleum of Ismail at Bukhara. Thus, columns must not have been completely unknown for Mazdean religious buildings, although it is true that their presence was limited by the widespread use of the dome and barrel vault. It is clear that certain massive and impressive columns of undoubtedly local style bear proto-Islamic traces (from Damghan to Khiva to Damavand). Byzantium's influence seems to have

been decisive in this sense,[43] although some scholars point to a recently discovered and problematic inscribed capital from the era of Shāpūr I,[44] along with some later ones at Taq-i Bustan, which support a decisive influence in the opposite direction.[45] The few Christian churches known in Iran (island of Karg) and Iraq (Hira, Ctesiphon) attest to the use of columns; they appear in a more classic basilica layout, arranged in two rows that divide the building into three naves. Other discoveries will emerge only with future excavations in Iran and neighboring regions, which thus far have been too few in number. But the Georgian basilica of Bolnisi (plates 96–97) has already yielded eloquent testimony in terms of decorative elements that are structurally functional, rather than occasionally inserted, as in the later cathedral in Ateni.

With the exception of their extensive use of mortar, Sasanian architects, like their Parthian predecessors, employed unbaked brick, baked brick, and stone—all building techniques borrowed in part from the Roman world. They were also familiar with the *iwan*, with its rectangular plan and open front wall, which was also frequently used during the subsequent Islamic period. A typical element of this period was the vault resting on four corner pendentives (plate 61), forming a semiconical shape that allows a passage from a quadrangular structure to a curve, and which is also visible and palpable on the exterior. Its use, while not always present, is seen both in buildings cautiously identified as religious and those destined for secular purposes, such as the palace at Qal'a-i Dukhtar from the era of Ardashīr I (plates 62–64), or the palace at Sarvistan (fifth century). According to a widely but not universally accepted theory, the domed spaces in Christian religious buildings in Europe derive from the Armenian model, which, in turn, comes from Sasanian Persia. This can be attributed to geographic proximity and also to the fact that for long periods Armenia was contained within the Eranshahr.[46] In any case it is curious that a splendid Roman nymphaeum was long designated a "temple of Minerva Media," the Persian Minerva, or Anahita. In any case, the most perfect examples of the "squaring of the circle" in architecture, or perhaps more accurately the "circling of the square" (because it is a question of at least smoothing over the "impossible" passage from a four-directional terrestrial building to the roof that is the image of the celestial vault), are Persian. These have intermediary states of approximation between square and circumference (eight, sixteen, or thirty-two sides), which parallel ideological anxieties about giving plausible and expressible form to the Neoplatonic salvational descent and reascent between unity and multiplicity.

Well-known royal palaces include those in the Mesopotamian part of the Persian Empire, at Kish, and the celebrated Taq-i Kisra palace at Ctesiphon.[47] These are characterized by the use of baked brick and spaces that are vaulted and subdivided into several stories. Blank windows, window slits shaped like arrows, and stepped crenellation comprise some of the decorative elements frequently used in the Near and Middle East.

The Sasanian emperors established numerous cities, and they often used Roman prisoners of war specifically for the construction of public works that included bridges, roads, and canals. While this has not been extensively investigated, city plans could be rectangular (Bishapur, Ivan-i Karkhah)—a layout that was particularly popular in the Hellenistic-Roman world—or, less frequently, circular, according to a scheme employed earlier by the Parthians and later followed by the Arabs (Baghdad). The city of Ardashīr Khurra (Firozabad) represents the circular urban plan par excellence, with a series of streets radiating outward, dividing the rest of the city into twenty principal sectors around the central tower. Following a formula that was customary throughout the ancient world, Sasanian cities were also divided into two parts: the administrative-palatial section and the *shahristan*, or residential portion. An impressive, fortified wall protected cities from possible enemy attacks. Architectural decorations were the same as on the facades of buildings discussed previously (small niches, arrow-shaped window slits, etc.), while long, often vaulted corridors ran inside the walls. It was not unusual for isolated fortifications to be positioned along the areas subject to invasions, and the concept of the defensive *vallum*, or palisade, was not unheard of, as seen in the wall of Darband, in the Caucasus (present-day Azerbaijan). In the late Sasanian era the territories far from the capital city of Ctesiphon had some true forts, probably meant for defensive purposes, but also for the provisioning of ships, as in the case of Ratto Kot (Pakistan). Archaeological exploration of this type of structure is only in the early stages, but it seems legitimate to hypothesize that these were fortified way stations along the coast controlled by the Persians, particularly during the rule of Khosrow I.[48]



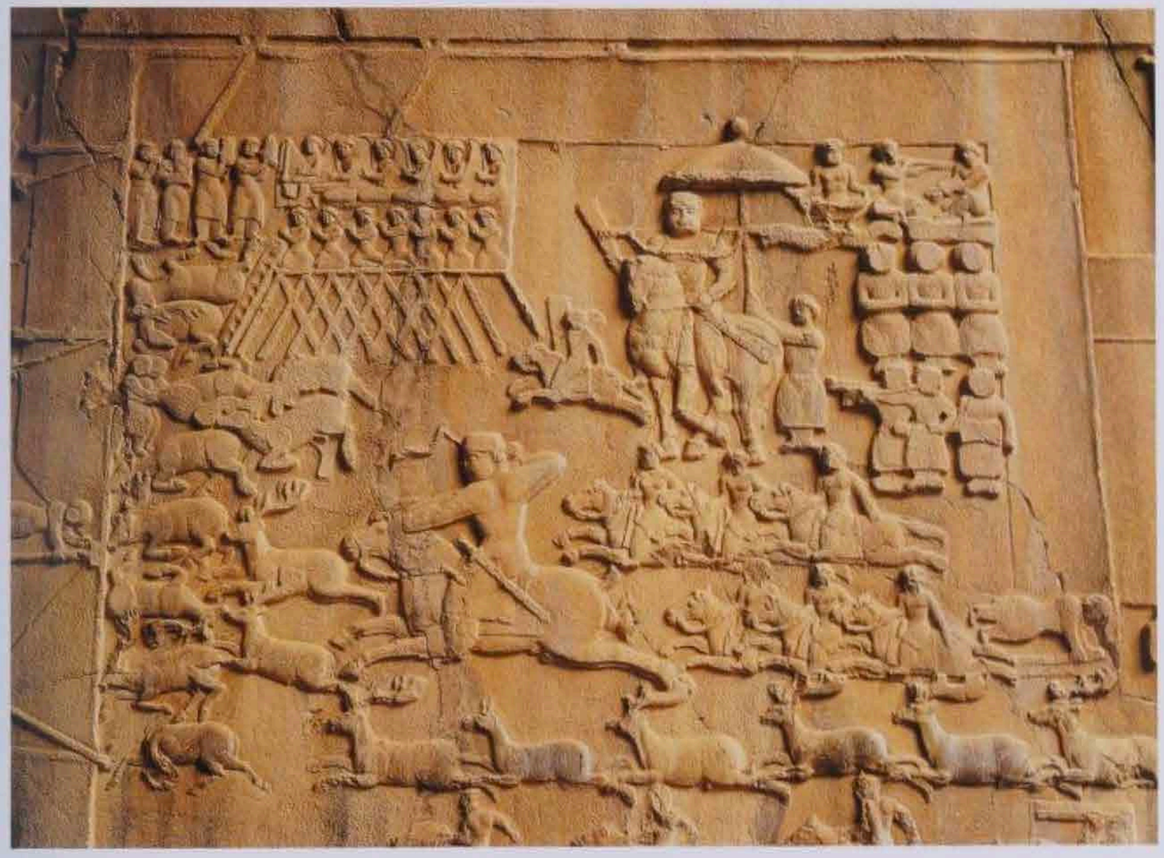
63–64. ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT. Two images of the interior of Qal'a-i Dukhtar, the palace of Ardashīr, Firozabad, third century

65. PAGE 94, ABOVE. The investiture of Khosrow II (?) on the back of the grotto at Taq-i Bustan, seventh century AD

66–67. PAGE 94, BELOW, AND PAGE 95. One of the half-piers at the entrance to the large grotto and a detail of its decoration, Taq-i Bustan

The large arched grotto dug out of the stone at Taq-i Bustan is a unique structure in Persian art (plates 65–72). This late work, probably dated to the era of Khosrow II, brings together the characteristics of Sasanian stone sculpture and the Roman-Byzantine triumphal monument, but from a genuinely Iranian viewpoint.[49] In terms of architectural analysis, Taq-i Bustan is a typical *iwan*, embellished in the upper portion by a stepped crenellation made from square stone blocks. Roman-Byzantine influence goes back to the very concept of the triumphal monument, unusual for the Persians (who instead specialized in carved stone art), but elements that are truly imported arise principally in the sculptural decoration of the facade (the two Winged Victories), and inside the large arched grotto.

In addition to the enigma of religious buildings in pre-Islamic Iran, there are also questions regarding tombs. Mazdeism prohibited burial, cremation, or committing remains to water, preferring, instead, to leave the corpse exposed to the elements and to animals, such as dogs and birds, which would convey the spirit to the next world. Only later could the stripped bones be collected and enclosed within special receptacles known as *ostodan*. In Persia itself there were various types of ossuaries: niches carved out of stone or onto slabs of stone in the earth, structures in the form of "fire altars" or columns, and actual pits where the remains of entire cadavers have been found. The latter type of discovery has raised a series of questions, including the impossibility of establishing if the corpse was buried whole in other spacious receptacles.[50] In other areas of central Asia where Iranian culture was present (particularly Chorasmia and Sogdiana, but also in Xinjiang) variously shaped terra-cotta *ostodon* were used, discovered, for the most part, during chance excavations.[51] Roman Ghirshman has identified an unusual stone container without a cover, now in the Archaeological Museum in Tehran, as an *ostodan*; he has



attempted to detect the principal deities in the Iranian pantheon in the partially preserved relief depictions on the four sides.[52] In reality, the object remains emblematic, and this sort of identification is most likely due to the fact that at the time Ghirshman was writing many similar ossuaries, later revealed to be Sogdian in origin, were attributed to Sasanian Persia.

In the field of funerary architecture mention should be made of the so-called "towers of silence" or *dakhma*, places where bodies were left exposed before the bones were collected in the *ostodan*. The oldest examples are all located in central Asia, specifically in Sogdiana,[53] and they look like actual towers. In Persia (and among the Parsi in India) these seem to date to the Islamic era,[54] except for one at Sar Mashhad[55] and another isolated structure in the vicinity of Bishapur. In the second case, it has been suggested that the structure is an individual tower of silence, erected specifically for a high ranking individual, perhaps a prince,[56] but all attempts at interpretation remain guesswork.

68. ABOVE, LEFT. Left panel of the large grotto at Taq-i Bustan, with a depiction of the royal boar hunt

69. Right panel of the large grotto at Taq-i Bustan, with a depiction of the royal deer hunt

ARCHITECTURAL DECORATION

Many palaces from the Sasanian era have architectural decoration on both their exteriors and their interiors, made from square or rectangular tiles.[57] Given the highly perishable nature of the stucco, these tiles must have required nearly continuous restoration, and it is not unlikely that their reorganization also presented an occasion for dismantling the entire damaged decoration and replacing it.

Stuccowork discovered at Bishapur (plate 77) and Hagiabad (plate 74), both in Fārs, provide the only iconographic data related to the early Sasanian period (the third and fourth–fifth centuries AD, respectively). Most of the stucco finds date to the fifth to sixth century and come from sites in Mesopotamia (Kish, Ctesiphon) and northeastern Iran (Damghan, Bandyan). Stuccowork from Chal Tarkhan-Eshkabad (near Tehran) includes decorations that unquestionably relate back to the Sasanian tradition, but all date to the Islamic era.[58]

The stucco tiles generally contain plant (plates 66–67) and animal (plates 68–72, 75) motifs, although human busts or entire figures (plates 74, 76–78), as well as a pair of small outstretched wings accompanied by a monogram or a half-moon, are also common. The latter were popular

70. ABOVE, LEFT. Detail of a horse's saddlecloth, from the relief of Khosrow II (?) at Taq-i Bustan, decorated with *senmurv* (fantastic animal) motifs

71. ABOVE, RIGHT. Fish in a pond, detail of the royal boar hunt at Taq-i Bustan

72. The sovereign on a boat, and hunting boar detail of the left panel at Taq-i Bustan

in official Sasanian iconography and can perhaps be associated with a sovereign's royalty or glory (*khvarnah*); fluttering ribbons and a ram with a necklace are also common motifs in stucowork,[59] as for example in a paving tile dating from the sixth century found during an undocumented excavation in Iraq.

The animals and, in at least one case, the human figures, are often contained within a circular frame made from a string of pearls with vine branches on the outside. This was a widespread decorative element throughout the ancient Iranian world, but its precise origins and meaning are not known. The only certain information we have, which comes from Sasanian era sites that have been methodically excavated, indicates that the so-called beaded medallion motif is found exclusively in the context of stucco decoration.[60]

In the early 1990s, Iranian archaeologists working at Bandyan made an exceptional and still little-known discovery:[61] a building where the interior has stucco panels created using a technique unlike the row by row arrangement of single-themed tiles. Inscriptions in Median Persian (typical of the Sasanian era) accompany various scenes. The relief panels at Bandyan that have been uncovered thus far constitute only the lower portion, but it is possible to identify the subject through a comparison with similar scenes discovered in their entirety, either at carved stone sites or in Sasanian metalwork. Various scenes delimited by plant motifs or geometric frames have been interpreted by Iranian archaeologists, according to the recognizable details, as a hunt on horseback, a battle against mounted central Asian barbarians, a reception, and various depictions of a religious nature. The horses of the hunters and warriors hurl themselves toward the target in a stylistic solution known as a "flying gallop," frequently employed by Sasanian artists but also widespread in the rest of the Iranian world and beyond; it can even be found in Korea and China, as far back as the Han era (220 BC–AD 224).[62] In the hunt scene the mount of the royal figure is recognizable by its particular harness, which includes a pom-pom shape that hangs over the horse's back, just behind the quiver. This depiction normally characterized the steed of the sovereign or that of Ahura Mazda, portrayed at a larger scale than the secondary figures in the same scene.[63] In these outlying regions of the empire, artists may have broken with official iconography, perhaps to the advantage of local lords. In the battle scene another pom-pom is visible and, beneath the horses lie the bodies of horsemen who have been killed, their mouths wide open, their faces showing moustaches, sparse beards, and elongated eyes. Enemies, thrown from their horses during battle, are rendered in similar fashion in some later Sogdian paintings at Penjikent (western Tajikistan). In religious scenes the anthropomorphic depictions are both male and female, but it is impossible to establish if these are priests or priestesses, deities, or aristocrats. Some seated male figures might be identified as deities, in particular one seated on a spiral-shaped element that has been interpreted as a cushion,[64] which probably refers to the aquatic element. Seated, cross-legged figures rarely appear in Sasanian art,[65] and this is one reason that the Bandyan panels may be local, if not provincial, in production.

Stuccowork has proved fruitful for researchers looking for analogies with late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in the West.[66] Sasanian art is best known through sculpture, since there are not many monuments, and their documentation dates back many centuries. Various voyagers have described Sasanian era stone reliefs, beginning with the Venetian Barbaro, who had visited Persia in 1474.[67] Subsequently, other reliefs were discovered, bringing the total number of such finds in Persia (principally in Fārs) to thirty-eight. There is only a single example of three-dimensional sculpture, at Bishapur, and it is probably a portrait of Shāpūr I. The Sasanians certainly created three-dimensional sculpture in metal, with a preference for the reproduction of royal busts, and a detailed study of the subject is found in publications by Roman Ghirshman and, above all, by the noted Belgian archaeologist Louis Vanden Berghe and his collaborators.[68] Working within the categories proposed by these scholars, Sasanian carved-stone monuments can be catalogued according to the depicted scenes: investiture, homage paid to a sovereign by

73. Stone head of a goddess (?), from Hagiabad, fourth century AD, National Museum, Tehran

74. Stucco bust of Shāpūr II (?), from Hagiabad, fourth century AD, National Museum, Tehran

75. Stucco plaque with depiction of a ram, Iran (?), Musée du Louvre, Paris

his entourage, the *shahanshah* and his retinue, triumph over enemies, equestrian combat, the horseman king, and royal hunts. As one can deduce from these categories, there are no truly religious scenes, since the sovereign always appears at the center of the composition, while deities participate as guarantors of the royal position and glory granted to the *shahanshah*.

Inscriptions (including multilingual ones) do not always clarify a monument's purpose. A celebratory function similar to that of Roman reliefs positioned in public spaces would seem refuted by the placement of many Sasanian stone sculptures in places that are practically inaccessible. However, it should be noted that some reliefs were placed next to preexisting and easily visible monuments from the Achaemenid era; more than one scholar has hypothesized that the Sasanian kings were deliberately trying to establish a connection to their illustrious predecessors in the region. At this point we will attempt to examine monumental sculpture, focusing principally on the identification of certain types of representation that characterize Sasanian art, without entering into too detailed an analysis of individual monuments.

In the early sculpted images that portray the investiture of Ardashīr I by Ahura Mazda (depicted in anthropomorphic form), one can already note a disc embellished with ribbons in the right hand of the god, offered to the *shahanshah*, who receives it with his right hand. This disc appears in many reliefs from the ancient Near East (also from the Parthian era) and it has been interpreted in various ways. The most convincing explanation seems to be that this disc image symbolizes the *khvarnah*, or glory, conferred to the *shahanshah* by Ahura Mazda, his divine representative on earth.[69] Scenes of this type, ascribable to Ardashīr's successors, appear in stone sculpture in various parts of Iran, with the figures depicted both standing and on horseback. In only one case—specifically at Taq-i Bustan—the Sasanian emperor identified as Khosrow II simultaneously receives the ribboned disc from two deities, Ahura Mazda and Anahita. All three figures appear frontally in a rather unnatural position, sculpted in almost three dimensions. However, Taq-i Bustan represents a case unto itself among Sasanian stone sculptures, and it must be analyzed with extreme caution before drawing any conclusions. But basing his observations on this relief, Vanden Berghe has hypothesized that the symbolism of the disc with ribbons is connected to divine glory and not to coronation, since no king can receive two crowns or two thrones at the same time.[70]

Other characteristics specific to Sasanian art can be deduced from an analysis of carved stone investiture scenes. According to a scheme well known throughout art of the Near East, the dimensions of the *shahanshah* are often (but not always) greater than those of the subordinate figures, but equal to those of the god, who significantly is always depicted without weapons.[71] Only at Taq-i Bustan is Khosrow II slightly taller than the two deities that appear at his side. In the reliefs showing the investiture of Ardashīr I and in a few other cases, the king raises his left hand and extends his index finger toward his mouth, a gesture that has been interpreted as an act of respect toward Ahura Mazda.[72] The other figures shown in this same scene raise their fingers in turn (but on their right hands), or hide their hands inside the sleeves of their garment, perhaps also a sign of respect. This gesture of the hands seems to be specific to Iranian art and is found throughout central Asia, in Gandhara and as far away as Chinese Turkistan.

The king's clothing includes a caftan cinched by a belt on his hips, a sort of sling over his chest known as an *apezae*, and various jewels and weapons.[73] He wears shoes decorated with ribbons, but it is possible that these are boots, mostly hidden beneath his trousers. The crown can be composed of various elements, including the *korymbos* (the spherical shape at the top), outstretched wings, a crescent, or an eight-pointed star (perhaps tied to the goddess Anahita?).[74] The band that runs around the crown's circumference is radial, turreted, or in the form of

winged creatures.[75] A more in-depth discussion of the crown as a distinctive feature of each individual monarch is found in the section on coins; for the moment we shall focus on the hanging and fluttering ribbons, attached to the imperial crowns as well as to the saddlery of horses and the necks of various animals. As with many elements of Sasanian art for which there are no clear interpretations, we must await further research. The most reliable hypothesis is that the ribbons refer to *khvarnah*, the divine glory of which the sovereign is a worthy receptacle.[76] The *lemnisci* mentioned by classical authors served the same purpose, namely to confer "great worth to honorary crowns," including in Rome.[77] Some Byzantine sources also describe the emperor's horse, on certain occasions, as harnessed in the Persian manner, namely with ribbons tied to the tail and hooves."[78]

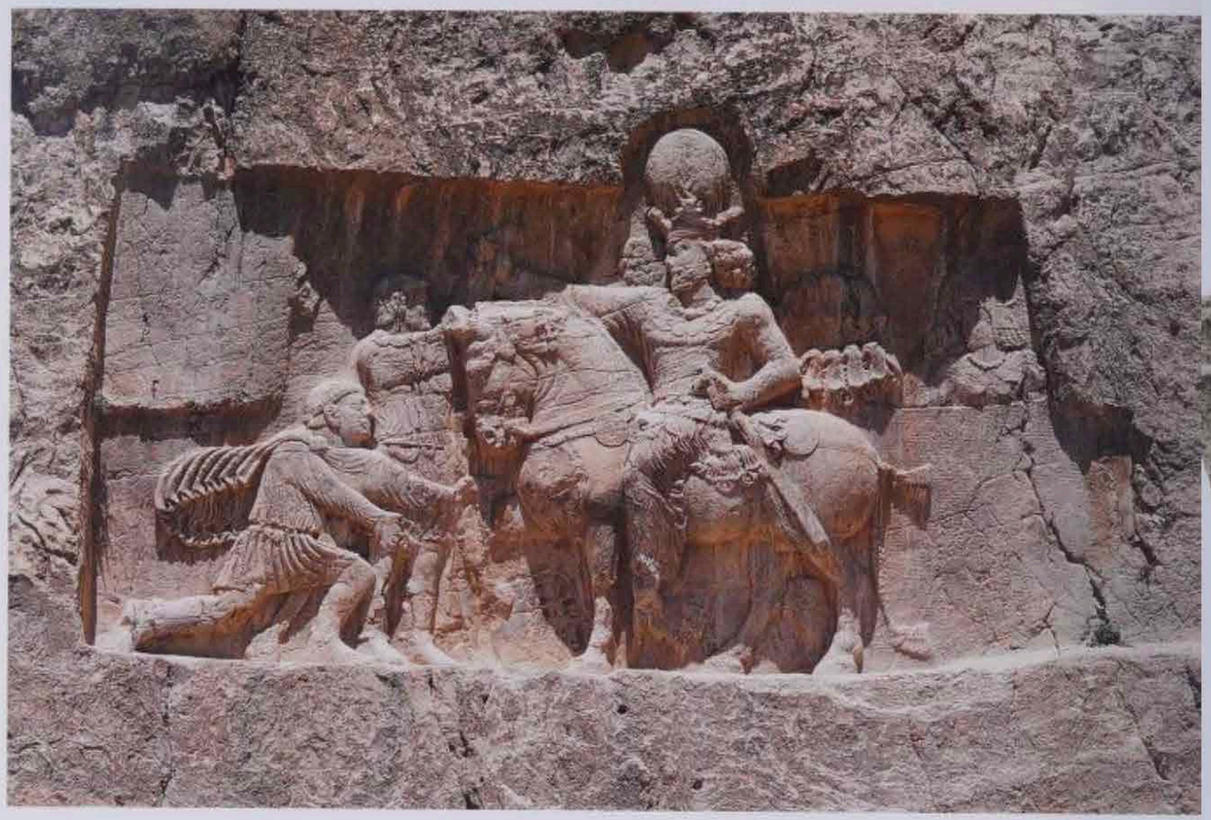
In monuments attributed to Ardashīr I, all figures are depicted in profile. In Sasanian art there is a preference for reproducing the human figure in profile or three-quarter view, with frontality reserved as the sole prerogative of the *shahanshah*, seated on the throne, generally with his hands resting on his sword hilt.[79] The aforementioned investiture scene at Taq-i Bustan, with three figures depicted frontally, is a singular case, for the moment without parallel in Sasanian art. This can be imputed to social transformations, but also, simply, to the influence of Byzantine and central Asian art.[80]

The investiture scene, supposedly of Khosrow II, is not the only relief at Taq-i Bustan (plate 65). On the back wall of the large *iwan* grotto, below this scene, is the image of a horseman with lance and shield, sheathed in armor, as is his steed. Behind the horseman's head is a halo, suggesting that this equestrian sculpture might be a depiction of the *fravashi* of the *shahanshah*, that is, his indestructible soul that existed even prior to his birth, and which is sometimes also

76. Investiture of King Narsete by the goddess Anahita, c. AD 300, Naqsh-i Rustam

77. Triumph of Shāpūr I over the emperors Gordianus III, Phillip the Arab, and Valerianus, second half of the third century AD, Bishapur

defined as a "guardian angel."[81] To the sides of this work, divided into two registers, are two hunting scenes of boar and deer, respectively (plates 68–69). These were originally colored and were perhaps conceived in imitation of a painting or tapestry.[82] In the boar hunting scene, the larger figure, firing an arrow from a boat, is shown twice, once with and once without a halo. According to the same interpretation, in this case too, the figure with the halo is not the *shahanshah* but rather his *fravashi*. At Taq-i Bustan there are other reliefs outside the *iwan* grotto, and one in particular is important because of the unusual presence of the god Mithra, depicted in three-quarter view to the left of the emperor (in this case Shāpūr II). He holds a sacred bundle of rods (the *barsom*), has a radiating halo, and rests on a lotus flower depicted according to Indian canons.[83] In any case, Taq-i Bustan is an "atypical" high point in Sasanian art, and it still puzzles scholars. In the late 1970s Japanese researchers clarified some of its lesser-known aspects, and they uncovered and photographed some apparently minor details.[84] The identification of the sovereign portrayed inside the *iwan* grotto, however, is still the subject of lively debate.[85] A later date has been suggested, in part because of the presence of a necklace with three pendants, unknown in coins prior to 628, worn by the two winged figures positioned on the facade of the *iwan* and the *shahanshah*.[86] The monument is also significant for the study of pre-Islamic Persian textiles since the garments worn by all the figures have rich decoration that is only associated with the late Sasanian period. At Taq-i Bustan (plates 79–81) there are also some capitals transported from other excavations, decorated with reliefs of frontally portrayed human figures with halos.[87] Various interpretations have been put forth for the identification of the figures on the capitals, and they clearly relate to celestial beings or deified kings seen in earlier works. There is also another capital from Shiraz, inscribed with effigies of Shāpūr I, his father Ardashīr, and



78. Triumph of Shāpūr I over the Romans, Phillip the Arab, and Valerianus, second half of the third century AD, Naqsh-i Rustam

79–81. ABOVE AND BELOW. Two reliefs and an image carved on Sasanian capitals, transported (?) to Taq-i Bustan

two secondary figures, perhaps ministers.[88] None of these figures have halos, and it has been suggested that the depictions might portray people living at the time the works were created, thus dating the capital to the third century.

Sasanian art frequently features a double depiction of prey shown simultaneously struck by the *shahanshah* and already dead at his feet.[89] In carved stone sculptures this scene appears only once, in a relief at Sar Mashad attributed to the era of Bahrām II,[90] where the sovereign appears standing, positioned between a threatening lion—shown twice, once being killed and then collapsed at the sovereign's feet—and some members of his family.

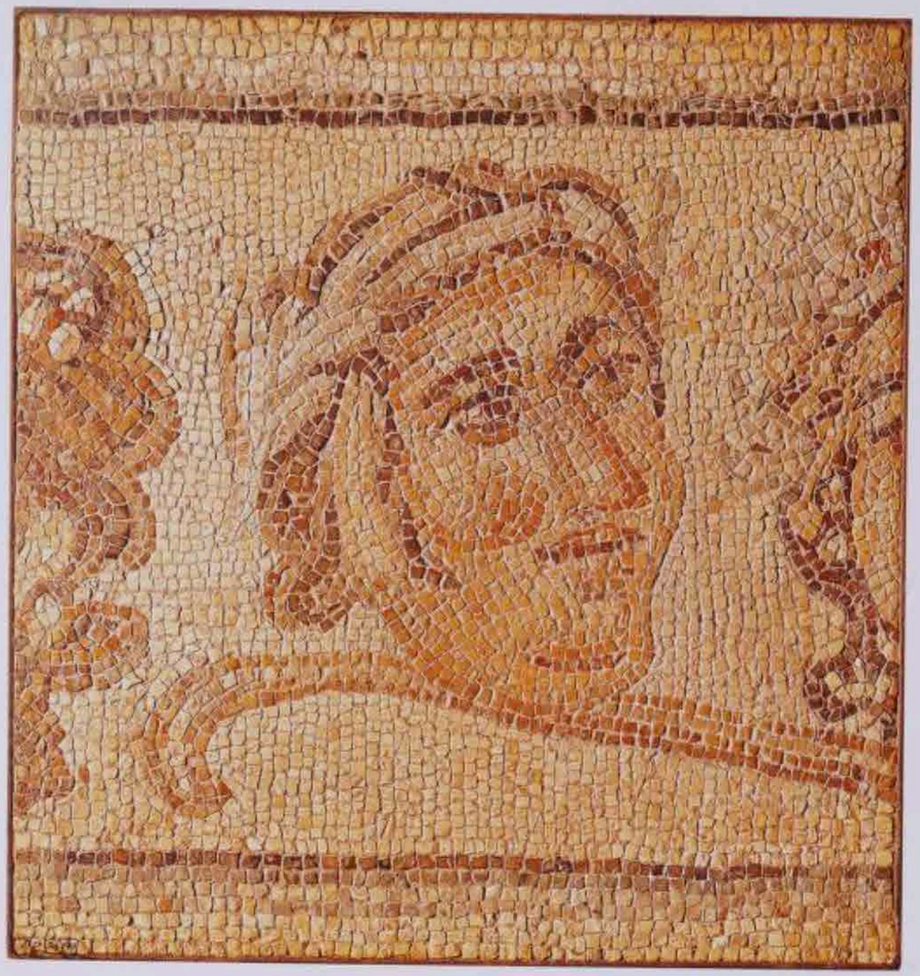
An iconographic detail worth mentioning is the putto figure wearing a diadem with ribbons, seen in two carved stone reliefs at Bishapur, which depict the scene of Shāpūr I's triumph over Gordianus III (r. 238–244), Phillip the Arab (r. 244–249), and Valerianus (r. 252–268). The placement of winged creatures in front of a figure does not occur often in Sasanian art compared, for example, to Sogdian painting.[91] Their function is to provide supernatural protection for the figure they stand in front of—a clear reference both to the concept of *khvarnah* and to the winged disc containing a human figure, a motif already widely disseminated during the Achaemenid period.[92] At least two carved stone reliefs (significantly datable to the third century, that is, to the early period of the Sasanian dynasty) depict a winged being, demonstrating that certain concepts thought to be characteristic of Iranian art in general were also well known to the Sasanians. In this specific case (but also at Taq-i Bustan), however, a purely Iranian concept is accompanied by an iconographic device specific to Greco-Roman art, such as the Cupid or the Winged Victory,[93] which would support theses maintaining that foreign elements were present from the beginnings of Sasanian art.

PAINTING AND MOSAIC

Sasanian painting is the least known form of pre-Islamic Persian art.[94] Once again, we need to look to classical and Islamic sources to find evidence of the existence of monumental painting in the Sasanian era. These works include scenes of battles, hunts, and the triumph of the *shahanshah* over the enemies of Iran.[95] Painting probably occupied a position of some importance, equal to that of carved stone sculpture, but the works that have survived are too few and too fragmentary to allow the advancement of even the slightest theory in this regard.

The technique used by the Sasanians (and in Asia in general) was tempera. It was applied over a layer of plaster, employing colors principally of mineral derivation, diluted with water. There was no use of fresco. There are extremely interesting paintings from the late Parthian era at Hatra (southern Iraq), where one can identify certain characteristics that act as a prelude to truly Sasanian art.[96] The scenes, all of which relate to hunting, are divided into vertical bands delineated by geometric or plant motif frames. Horsemen racing at a full gallop hit their prey with a bow, or, in one case, with a lance. A bearded and turbaned figure, armed with a lance, lashes out against a boar, while a second animal lies in the lower portion of the composition, not because it has been killed earlier, but rather in keeping with a popular formula in Sasanian art (especially in decorative metalwork) whereby the infallibility of the hunter (almost always the *shahanshah*) is implied by the second depiction of the animal, already dead beneath the hooves of the horse.

Sasanian paintings and graffiti have been discovered at Dura-Europos in Syria,[97] but the only finds in Persia itself that are in better-than-fragmentary condition come from Susa and Hagiabad. These can all be dated to the fourth century. The only remaining wall painting at Susa can



82. Male head wearing a crown of laurel, mosaic from the palace of Bishapur, Musée du Louvre, Paris

83. Harp player, mosaic from the palace of Bishapur, Musée du Louvre, Paris

be identified, with all likelihood, as a hunting scene in which a central figure on horseback, larger in size, appears surrounded by his subordinates and by various animals. The central figure is not recognizable, given the painting's extremely poor condition, but he wears a richly decorated garment with a diamond pattern, clearly indicating his rank. The background is entirely blue. At Hagiabad, however, the fragments recovered by Iranian archaeologists belong to different scenes, although they are scarcely recognizable, with the exception of some human busts depicted in three-quarter or frontal view, mostly reconstructed. Various identifications have been hypothesized, without any definitive resolution, due to our little knowledge of Sasanian painting and its specific characteristics.[98] Normally in Sasanian art, frontal depiction is reserved for the *shahanshah*, deities, or illustrious, mythicized predecessors. The busts in stucco identified as frontal portraits of Shāpūr II (plate 74), which have been used as the basis for dating the site of Hagiabad, and the painted bust, also depicted frontally and cautiously associated with Hormizd II Kushanshah (r. c. 302–309), probably can be linked to such earlier works. They would have been executed after the death of the subject, and it would thus seem appropriate to date them to the fourth–fifth century.[99]

As indicated above, there is some graffiti from Dura-Europos, Hatra,[100] Lakh-Mazar,[101] and especially Persepolis that can be dated to the Sasanian era. The graffiti at Persepolis, commonly dated to the third century,[102] depicts processions of bearded figures in profile, some of which are probably royal, considering attributes such as the disc with fluttering ribbons held by two of them and the usual pom-poms affixed to their horses.

The excavations at Bishapur—the city that Shāpūr I founded around 260, where it appears that he employed Roman craftsmen enslaved after the surrender of Valerianus—have revealed the unexpected as well as emblematic presence of splendid mosaics (plates 82–83).[103] What is problematic, however, is the combination of Iranian and classical elements of a Dionysian stamp,[104] which is difficult to explain since this was not a time of idyllic relations between Persia and Rome. We shall see (particularly in regard to decorative metalwork) that themes popular in Hellenistic-Roman Dionysian iconography met with some success at the court of Ctesiphon, after some adjustments to make them appealing to a Persian audience. This should not be completely surprising. Indeed, Julian the Apostate was not only a follower of Mithra, but also may have been open to other forms of religiosity of an Iranian type.[105]

The most interesting subjects include the heads of various figures, which have been interpreted as having Dionysian origins, and the figure of a harpist. Here, Sasanian qualities are undoubtedly recognizable in the preference for the representation of faces in three-quarter view or profile and the fluttering ribbons tied to the hair of the musician.[106]

Unfortunately, the near total abandonment of archaeological sites from the pre-Islamic

era precludes adding much else to our store of knowledge. There has been news of discoveries of fragmentary traces of mosaics at Susa (with a Greek inscription)[107] and at Ctesiphon,[108] but there is a shortage of literature on these mosaics.

DECORATIVE METALWORK

While the best-known areas of Sasanian art are carved stone sculpture and architecture, in the last thirty years scholarship has focused on decorative metalwork, admired even by the notoriously particular Cesare Brandi. Thanks above all to research carried out by Russian and American specialists, we now have a more or less methodological system for establishing the authenticity of objects and their attribution to Persia itself rather than to neighboring regions.[109] Other publications have appeared, more modestly, as catalogues of collections that are less well known but extremely significant.[110] On the occasion of an important exhibition,[111] P. O. Harper wrote an introduction to the various collections in museums throughout the world. This American scholar also has proposed a dating system and a detailed categorization of the forms of Sasanian metalwork, in many cases based on models of eastern-Roman derivation. The use of metal articles also coincided with certain Roman and Byzantine examples produced expressly for the exchange of gifts (in a diplomatic context, perhaps), or for propaganda. Sumptuary items, specifically including textiles and metals of an Iranian stamp (in this case from Sogdiana), were probably even commissioned by Chinese emperors exclusively for diplomatic exchanges.[112]

Just as with other luxury genres, such as silk textiles, the production of finely worked precious metals was controlled by the court. Clearly there were peripheral areas of production that ignored "metropolitan" canons regarding the shape and weight of objects, the purity of the

84–87. Iranian decorative metalwork

84. ABOVE, LEFT. Achaemenid plate. Riza-i Abbasi Museum, Tehran

85–86. ABOVE, RIGHT AND OPPOSITE, LEFT. Two post-Sasanian plates from eastern Iran (Marv?), Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

87. OPPOSITE, RIGHT. Sasanian plate discovered in the Ural region, not far from Perm' (Russia), Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Animals portrayed in Sasanian metalwork often have attributes that make them particularly suitable for the hypostasis of a deity or an abstract concept such as royalty or *khvarnah*.[116] Flying creatures were popular, sometimes depicted with ribbons tied to their necks or a necklace, and they are even endowed with halos. The ram with fluttering ribbons tied to its neck and curved, diverging horns is universally interpreted as an image of *khvarnah*. Other recurring animals are deer, felines such as tigers and lions (plate 89), and boars' heads. One plate has an image of a horse harnessed from head to foot, probably connected to a particular ritual, perhaps involving the immolation of the animal.[117] In many of these cases, however, Sasanian attribution is subject to debate, and it is not unusual for works to be attributed to the Islamic era. The same observation can be made for works decorated with figures of fantastic beings, including Pegasus, griffins, and monstrous composite creatures endowed with wings, horns, and even plant elements that emerge from their bodies.

Two very similar plates, now in the United States and Russia, respectively, have themes that scholars have defined as "Dionysian."[118] There is a procession of mythical figures where the central figure, larger in scale, is normally identified as Dionysus in Hellenistic-Roman contexts, but assumes female connotations in Persia, supporting the possibility that it represents Anahita. Plates decorated with this type of iconography are related to other Sasanian works such as the mosaics at Bishapur, where the composition combines purely Iranian elements and other elements that arrived in Persia by way of Rome and Byzantium. It is interesting that these are pagan and not Christian subjects, as one might expect, considering the dating of the two plates to the fourth–fifth century.

One unique example is a monster with a dog's head, feline paws, wings, and a plumed or reptilian tail commonly defined as a *senmurv*, a mythical creature, part mammal and part bird, associated in Islamic-era Persian literature with other fantastic animals, including the phoenix.[119] This figure seems to make a late appearance in Sasanian art and in only one case (with the exception of the reliefs at Taq-i Bustan) do scholars all agree in an attribution to Sasanian Persia. The object in question is a gilded silver carafe dated to the fifth–sixth century. Most works decorated with *senmurv* (see the image from Ateni, plate 95), particularly those in metal and cloth, seem to be from the Islamic era or from outside Iran. Some experts have hypothesized that the identification is not correct and that this composite creature should be associated once again with a manifestation of *khvarnah*.[120]

Sasanian decorative metalwork was widely disseminated in antiquity, and many Iranian themes were introduced to and accepted by other cultures, which is precisely what happened with other, easily transported articles. In fact, although textiles, metal plates, and pitchers were among the most common funerary objects in tombs in central Asia, Tibet, and China, many silver and gilded silver objects discovered in China proper can definitely be considered Sasanian or Kushan-Sasanian. Articles in precious metals from Persia or neighboring regions where Sasanian metalwork was clearly known (Sogdiana, Bactria-Tokharistan, and Chorasmia) were unearthed during excavations in China,[121] and many of these are now in Japan, in the imperial storehouse at Shoso-in, in Nara.[122] Some hypogeum tombs from the Tang period (618–907), associated with members of the imperial family, have wall paintings depicting women and servants holding vases, carafes, and trays that are typical of the Iranian world.[123] Iranian ornamental motifs would similarly have been widely disseminated in central Asia and the Far East, where they probably would have been highly prized.

88. Bronze bust of Sasanian king, from Lajvard, sixth–seventh century, Musée du Louvre, Paris

TEXTILES

Like painting, Sasanian textile art must have been held in very high regard in the ancient world, judging from descriptions in Latin, Greek, Islamic, and even Chinese sources. Most studies related to Sasanian weaving are based on an analysis of these sources and on the sole carved stone relief at Taq-i Bustan, where textile decorations appear.[124] In reality there is little that can be said in this regard. The only textile finds that can be attributed to a Sasanian site that was excavated in scientific fashion, Shahr-i Qumis,[125] have no particular decorations, and there is no indisputable data about production within Persia.

The commonly held view is that typically Sasanian iconography included figures of animals (isolated and in procession), continuous diamond motifs (Hellenistic in derivation),[126] and the beaded medallion (a circular frame with rows of small white discs along the edge and with various types of subjects on the inside).[127] A comparison with other art forms makes it possible to give Sasanian attribution to the diamond motif, the beaded medallion shown in isolation with a rosette at the center, and the motif of three aligned circlets, which recur above all in the reproduction of royal vestments in metalwork and in the paintings at Hagiabad.

There are no textiles finds that can be attributed unquestionably to Sasanian Persia; studies in this regard have been limited to establishing links with what might have been the iconography of Sasanian textiles, through comparative analyses of fabric fragments found at various sites distributed over a vast area (Europe, Egypt, central Asia, and the Far East). This is clearly the only approach possible, given the near total absence of incontrovertible data, but the vulnerability of this method is apparent in the wake of more recent, illuminating archaeological discoveries and consequent contributions to art history. As a result, most of the textiles that were previously recognized as products of pre-Islamic Persia can, in fact, be associated with Byzantine, Coptic, or Sogdian production, which was influenced by Sasanian art in general.

The only textile that can be attributed with any certainty to Sasanian production is a fragment in linen and wool, at the Benaki Museum in Athens,[128] and that came from an antiquarian market. It depicts a figure on horseback, larger than the other figures, which appear to be servants. The main figure has a quiver at his side and wears a short cloak and a caftan. The garment is decorated along the lower hem, at the wrists, at the waist, and on the chest, with a row of pearls, doubled in two bands on the left shoulder. A series of drop elements appears on the entire remaining portion of the garment. These may depict precious gems, which would have been sewn to the garment. Similar decorations recur on the robe of the *shahanshah*, in the upper portion of the relief at the back of the large arched grotto at Taq-i Bustan, and, in conjunction with the diamond pattern decoration in a silk fragment of uncertain provenance, attributed to Sasanian Persia.[129] Behind this main figure, one of three subordinate figures (all in profile, bearded, with eyes wide open) is depicted in the act of lifting a staff with a rosette with sixteen petals contained in a sort of wheel at its tip. Its base, embellished with two outstretched wings, rests on the rump of the horse. The tips of every ray of the rosette seem to be implanted in a series of discs arranged around the circumference of the wheel. Perhaps this depicts a system that was actually used to support the rosette. This element has been interpreted as an insignia of rank;[130] in fact, in the Sasanian era, the rosette or the eight-pointed star (or multiples of eight) was probably connected to the idea of royalty.[131] The same servant wears a ribbon knotted behind his head and a caftan with heart-shaped motifs, seen earlier on the garments of

89. Lion slaughtering a deer, Sasanian or post-Sasanian silver dish with gilded ground. Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

central Asian figures (for example at Gulbayn, Afghanistan, fourth–fifth century),[132] and in a silk fragment discovered in central Asia, now at the Louvre.[133] In the upper portion, two rows of pearls form a frame for the composition, following a formula seen earlier at Hagiabad.[134] In essence, the figure in this textile is markedly Iranian in character, and all the details point to a Sasanian precedent, although its discovery has not been documented. The depicted scene and the technique of execution seem more appropriate for a tapestry than for a fabric used for clothing. Narrative scenes with unquestionably Persian subjects, however, do appear in a silk fragment used as part of a pair of trousers, discovered at Antinoe (Egypt), which can be dated to the sixth century and attributed to Coptic production. The scene seems to be an episode in the war against the Abyssinians (indeed, African warriors are portrayed), in which the *shahanshah* (Khosrow I?) is depicted frontally, enthroned.[135]

The Sasanians' greatest contribution to textile art was the beaded medallion, although, as previously noted, the motif recurs in pre-Islamic Persia principally in architectural decoration in stucco,[136] while its reworking, appreciated in both the west and the east, seems to have been a Sogdian contribution. The beaded medallion motif was used over an extremely vast area, at least until the eleventh century. It is seen nearly everywhere, particularly in early medieval painting in Europe, where it appears on the garments of emperors, bishops, and popes, but also on the clothing of saints, and in some unusual wood crucifixions of the Catalan school, where Christ appears wearing a long tunic decorated in this manner. Entire walls of Christian churches or Buddhist grottos in central Asia reproduce the motif in paint, which was much less costly than the use of so-called *velaria*, actual fabrics, generally ornamented, which were hung on the walls of a religious building or on sacred furnishings.

CERAMICS

The lack of archaeological activity in Iran has resulted in an enormous void in terms of ceramics from pre-Islamic Persia. Nearly all the information in this field comes from chance or undocumented discoveries, and only minimally from excavations carried out in Iran and Iraq, particularly during the 1930s.[137] The few sites where interesting ceramic objects have been discovered include Dailaman (in the region of Mazendaran)[138] and Susa (in southwestern Iran).[139] Some progress has been made, thanks to Italian archaeological expeditions, at the ancient capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon,[140] and other sites in Iran proper (plates 90–91).[141]

As frequently confirmed in other artistic genres, with ceramics there was continuity rather than a break between the Parthian and Sasanian periods.[142] The type of glazed ceramic that is characteristic of the Sasanian era can easily be distinguished from work from the Islamic era and was disseminated almost exclusively in the Mesopotamian region under Persian control. In any case, in Mesopotamia itself and in other areas of the *Eranshahr*, the prevailing taste was for unglazed ceramic, sometimes decorated through the use of dyes.[143] This technique seems to have been specific to northern Mesopotamia, the site of a ceramic fragment and an entire vase. The two objects were decorated with deer depicted both in isolation, inside a beaded medallion with fluttering ribbons at their necks, and in procession, inside horizontal frames. These animals, endowed with branched horns, appear frequently in Sasanian art, particularly in metalwork. The influence of metalwork seems notably strong in two pitchers with handles from the late Sasanian era, now respectively in Switzerland and Israel.[144] We do not know where they were produced, although we can approximate their location of origin as northern Iran. In both cases the decoration consists of circular frames containing individual goats and deer, motifs that also recur in precious metal vases, objects that were out of reach for the lower social classes who had to settle for imitations in less-expensive materials.

Other ceramic objects are rare; a circular terra-cotta tile depicting tightrope walkers juggling is an example.[145] The tile, which came from an antiquarian market, seems unique to its genre, and it is not improbable that it was made during the Islamic era, considering the decoration on the clothing of the figure to the right, which has never been encountered in earlier art.

GLASS AND JEWELRY

Sasanian society greatly enjoyed luxury and thus could not ignore the use of glass objects.[146] For various reasons there are few finds that can be attributed with certainty to Sasanian Persia. First of all, there is no clear distinction between Persian and Roman glass, resulting in great indecision regarding attributions to one culture or the other.[147] Furthermore, for this art form, too, there have been few discoveries from scientifically conducted archaeological excavations, and these are concentrated principally in Mesopotamia.[148]

In Persia there was generally a preference for transparent glass, blown and then decorated with engraving or with applications and color while the glass mixture was still hot. The most common articles were bowls (plate 92) and containers for liquids, such as carafes, embellished with decorations (often geometric) on both body and handle (plate 93). There are at least two glass fragments from undocumented excavations, and these are decorated, respectively, with gold foil and a relief figure (plate 94). In both cases a *senmurv* is depicted, but it is not possible to establish whether these works can be ascribed to the Islamic era.

Persian glass was probably in great demand abroad. The tomb of a Japanese emperor from the fifth century has yielded a bowl, probably Sasanian in origin, and the Shoso-in treasure also includes some Persian-style glass objects, which may, however, be dated to a later era.[149] Glass pitchers have also been discovered in Korea; their forms immediately bring to mind metal articles, but it is difficult to date them.[150] Some pitchers decorated with circular applications containing a flying creature and executed in a style similar to that of some Sasanian seals can be attributed to the Islamic period.[151] Animals are shown individually, turned to the right or the left, with tails made of long, separated feathers.

Sasanian art abounds with references to precious ornaments worn by kings and queens. Judging from carved stone sculpture and metalwork, the preferred jewelry included necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, worn by both men and women. Other typical objects of ornamentation from this period were rings for holding together part of the beard and finger caps used by archers, all in precious metals. Weapons and harnesses for horses could also be embellished with precious gems and metals.[152] Some Byzantine and Arab sources describe the clothing of the *shahanshah* as being studded with precious gems, and it seems that in earlier eras there was a thin plate of precious metal, pierced with holes, meant to be applied or sewn to the garments of those who could allow themselves such splendor. The Museo d'Arte Orientale in Rome has a silver plaque consisting of a beaded medallion containing a boar's head. It is not clear if this was a decoration for a garment or a harness.[153]

We know of at least three gold medallions, now in a private American collection. They must have originally been applied to a necklace or bracelet. The motifs on these objects are similar to those in other Sasanian art genres: the bust of a king, a ram with fluttering ribbons that rests on a pedestal shaped like outstretched wings, and a wading bird, all in profile view.

The collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France includes a cameo that is unique in its genre (plate 94) and is not normally included by scholars in the group of seals. With its engraving, however, it might well be considered a type of jewelry to be worn, after suitable modifications and mounting. This ogival-shaped cameo most likely depicts the victory of Shāpūr I over the Emperor Valerianus, although the plausible date seems to be later.[154]

SEALS AND COINS

The study of small artifacts in the form of semi-precious gems decorated with figures (seals), and impressions made by them on shapeless masses of clay is fundamental for our knowledge of both iconography and inscriptions in the language that was used during the Sasanian era (Median-Iranian or Pahlavi). Given their nature, seals must have been used at all levels of ancient Persian society, perhaps as amulets,[155] but inscribed seals were used above all by the upper and cultivated classes, such as governors, members of the clergy, and aristocrats in general. But their study is also extremely important for understanding the territorial division of the *Eranshahr*, since the provincial authorities in the various provinces had to seal every official document with their personal emblem.[156] The iconography is very rich, given the personal use

90. Amphora in green-glazed ceramic, unknown provenance, fifth–sixth century AD, National Museum, Tehran

91. Green-glazed ceramic vase, from Khuzistan, third–fifth century AD, National Museum, Tehran

92. OPPOSITE, ABOVE. Bowl "of Khosrow I," solid gold frame, glass paste inlays and a central engraving in rock crystal, sixth century AD, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Medailles, Paris

93. OPPOSITE, RIGHT. Glass goblet, provenance unknown, third–fourth century AD, National Museum, Tehran

94. ABOVE. Victory of Shāpūr I over the Roman Emperor Valerianus, third–fourth century AD, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Medailles, Paris

to which such objects were put, and this enabled the owner to adopt whatever motif he chose, including those that were neither conceived for nor accepted in works of an official nature.[157] Thus there were animals such as the scorpion (officially held in contempt by the Mazdean religion), or fantastic composite beings (the famous "medieval fancies," also widely disseminated in Romanesque and Gothic art in the West)[158] including sirens and harpies,[159] or deities depicted according to an iconography that was unknown in other artistic genres in Sasanian Persia. These images include, for example, Mithra in a chariot or being born from a stone, themes more consonant with Indian or Hellenistic taste and somewhat frequently encountered in central Asia and even among ancient Tibetans (in certain textiles that may have arrived by way of Sogdiana).[160] The motif of two twins nursed by a she-wolf certainly originated in the Greco-Roman West; this theme was much appreciated among Iranian populations in Persia and also in central Asia, as attested to by Sogdian paintings at Qal'a-i Qahqaha (not far from present-day Khogiand), dating to the fourth century.[161] The cross, another theme widely used for seals, indicates probable Christian patronage; but altars and fire altars also appear.[162]

Seals often feature fantastic animals or beings (Pegasus, first and foremost) depicted according to an extremely ancient iconography that was not often used by Sasanian artists, whose roots probably lay in Mesopotamian art.[163] The most significant group of animals—especially birds, felines, and goats—are portrayed individually. The human figure also occupies a place of prominence, represented in the form of busts, both male and female, and in rare cases understood to be the portrait of the seal's owner.[164] As a rule, only deities and heroes are depicted frontally on seals.[165]

The study of engraved gems is perhaps the most recent area of research in Sasanian art. It is hoped that this too will contribute to expanding our knowledge in the field of pre-Islamic Persian iconography.

Numismatics has provided much of the chronology related to the succession to the Persian throne. Sasanian coins could be in various metals, but the use of silver was particularly widespread; gold coins were rare.[166] Coins feature the bust of a sovereign, in some cases accompanied by his consort and heir. Generally the bust of the king appears on one side, in profile view, or, less frequently, frontally with an inscription in Pahlavi.[167] We know of only five sovereigns who are depicted frontally, usually on gold coins; these were distributed throughout the entire duration of the Sasanian dynasty.[168] At the time of Khosrow II, instead, it seems that there was a predilection for the frontal representation of the king on every type of coin. This tendency has been attributed to the influence of Byzantine customs.[169] Various subjects could be depicted on the back, although the most common symbol was certainly the fire altar, sometimes flanked by two armed figures.

It was long believed that each individual *shahanshah* could be identified by his crown, which was different for every monarch. This is true in part, but scholars need to exercise extreme caution, since a single sovereign could wear more than one type of crown.[170] If a king lost his throne but subsequently reconquered it, it is probable that his crown would change, depending on the period of rule to which it referred. This was because it was believed that once a king was dethroned, he lost the glory (or *khvarnah*) granted him by Ahura Bazda, symbolized by the

crown. If he returned to lead the *Eranshahr*, he was assigned another crown, evidence of renewed divine acceptance.[171] Another hypothesis regarding the Sasanian crowns principally concerns their reproduction in sculpture. In some cases it is likely that distinctions were based on colors, as certain written sources would seem to attest.[172] Finally, the repetition of crowns could be due to the desire of certain *shahanshah* to be depicted with the specific attributes of kings and heroes from the past. In this way, the *khvarnah* would no longer relate to each individual monarch, but rather to the entire dynasty.[173]

Beginning in the fifth century, silver Sasanian coins were widely circulated, above all in central Asia and China, and their continual use has been confirmed by stratigraphic dating. An explanation for this seems to lie in Sogdiana, where beginning precisely in the fifth century coinage was based on the model of the drachma of Bahrām V Gor. Huge quantities of Sasanian drachmas paid by Firūz to the Ephtalites poured into central Asia, apparently reaching as far as China, by way of Sogdiana.[174] In similar fashion, coins issued by the Persian mint helped not only to furnish a stable model for basing the value of international exchanges, but also to spread the iconography contained on the coins, particularly in central Asia and among the Arabs.

THE FATE OF SASANIAN ART

As readers undoubtedly will have noted, each section of this survey concludes with a discussion of the art form's fate and dissemination in antiquity. In many cases the role played by the Sogdians in this process needs to be specified, since Sogdian art itself is greatly indebted to the Sasanians.[175] At this point it is perhaps best to stress Iranian features in general, both among so-called barbarian peoples and among the most advanced civilizations, such as the Byzantine and the Chinese.

In the past authors such as Roman Ghirshman and André Grabar focused on the dissemination of Sasanian art, primarily looking at the Byzantium and the Western world,[176] but without overlooking Coptic art.[177] Byzantium, in fact, shared an enormous eastern frontier with Persia, and it is obvious that there were artistic exchanges, despite the nearly perennial conflict between the two realms. Syrian Antioch (now southeastern Turkey), often besieged and conquered by the Sasanian kings, is a case in point. The city is the site of some of the most beautiful mosaics of the fifth–sixth century, produced in countries that border the Mediterranean.[178] Iranian elements in the Antioch mosaics were first noted in the 1930s. These are birds with ribbons at their necks, rams' heads on a pedestal shaped like outstretched wings, lions with ribbons at their necks, and plant motifs.[179] True hunting scenes in these mosaics immediately drew the attention of scholars because of similarities between the abduction of a small tiger by a Roman horseman and the exploits of Bahrām V Gor, celebrated in the literature of the Islamic era and illustrated on some silver Sasanian plates. Probably, as Prudence Harper has noted, this is not a scene borrowed from the literary tradition, but rather a general hunting episode, faithfully reproduced in various materials in both Persia and Byzantium.[180] However, it should be noted that very close literary parallels exist between the figure of Bahrām V and the much older Roman figure of Domitian.[181] Also at Antioch, one of the mosaics of the great hunting scene known as the "Megalopsychia" shows a standing figure piercing a leopard with his lance, while

95. *Senmurv*, relief on a fragment reused in the wall of the Georgian church in Ateni, seventh century

a second, identical animal already lies on the ground, perhaps in keeping with a well-known scheme that alluded to the infallibility of the Sasanian hunter.

The *senmurv*, or rather the fantastic animal normally identified as such,[182] is a motif that clearly entered the Christian-Byzantine repertoire through Sasanian channels and was subsequently widely disseminated in Islamic art (plate 95). The *senmurv* was also popular in Byzantine art,[183] in sculpture, painting, and textiles, and in the art of Armenia[184] and Georgia,[185] perhaps because Christians recognized the biblical Leviathan in this figure.[186] Depictions of *senmurv* soon spread throughout barbarian Europe and into the Italian territories that were more or less directly under Byzantine control. One exceptional example appears in the painted decoration that imitates curtains (*velaria*) in the apse of the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta in Summaga, outside Venice (second half of the thirteenth century).[187]

Recently Boris Marshak has observed that some of the typical solutions seen in Sasanian carved stone sculpture were known to Sogdian painters of the eighth century.[188] It is interesting to note that the Sasanian monuments in question are the third-century reliefs at Firozabad, attributed to the period of Ardashīr I. In fact, the horse on the left of the Sogdian painting recalls the felled steed of the Arsacid sovereign, unseated by the lance of Ardashīr. Excavations of Sogdian sites, now spanning both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, have yielded other paintings rich in decorative themes of Sasanian origin. At Afrasyab, in pre-Islamic Samarkand, there is a Sasanian-style *senmurv* on the garments of a figure portrayed during the celebration of a ritual that is not clearly identified;[189] some gilded silver plates, also Sogdian, depict the same subject.

In this case, a (late) Sasanian provenance is certain, since a *senmurv* typology that might be considered genuinely Sogdian appears in a painting cycle from the eighth century, discovered at Penjikent (western Tajikistan). These works contain the first depiction of the exploits of the

96–97. ABOVE AND OPPOSITE. Two details of capitals from the basilica in Bolnisi, Georgia, showing a Sasanian influence

hero Rustam, who the Persian poet Firdusi described, in the Islamic era, as being protected by the mythical creature called a *senmurv*, which healed his battle wounds; in this instance the creature resembles a winged lion.

The Sogdians themselves maintained diplomatic-commercial relations with the Byzantines, concerning themselves above all with trade in silk and luxury articles. Specific elements of Sogdian textile art, initially borrowed from the Sasanians but reworked in completely original fashion, appear in the decoration of some of the most ancient silks attributed to Byzantium.[190] The Sogdians' intense mercantile activity acted as an ideal means of dissemination of Sasanian iconography. Moreover, the audience for such sumptuary articles was of a social class that was in a position to support works of certain significance. Items of Iranian derivation made their way to northwestern India, specifically Kashmir, where beaded medallions appear in the decoration of Hindu temples and bronze Buddhist statuettes dating back to the eighth century. During this period the Sasanians no longer existed, and it seems absurd to attribute such elements directly to the Persians when it is universally accepted that the Sogdians were very active along this stretch of the Silk Route.[191]

The last Sasanians had relations with the kingdom of Aksum (present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia), and they occupied Yemen after removing it from the domain of that African entity. There was no direct Persian influence on Aksumite art until after the fall of the Sasanians, which came about through Byzantine or Arab-Islamic channels.[192] In the Arabian Peninsula, instead, recent discoveries attest to a Sasanian presence: a seal depicting a lion, decorative stucco fragments with figures of animals and plants,[193] and especially a sculpted capital and architrave from Yemen, perhaps ascribable to the period of Persian domination.[194] The sculpted decorations depict hunting scenes, and one in particular shows a lion standing on his hind legs, struck simultaneously by a horseman and a standing lancer. In a scheme that recalls that of other royal hunt scenes, a second lion, already dead, lies beneath the figure of the lancer. However, in the case of the carved Yemenite capital the artist does not seem to have completely understood a concept specific to Sasanian art, lending support to the hypothesis that the two friezes were examples of local production. In terms of architectural decoration, the stepped crenellation that is so widespread in art of the ancient Near East could have been imported into the Arabian Peninsula through Sasanian Yemen. Some of the first examples of the use of this motif in pre-Islamic architecture appear at the temple of Amrit in Yemen.[195]

We have noted how the image of the mythical *senmurv* also appears in Islamic art. In fact, throughout the art of Islam there are elements borrowed from the Sasanians (and others), beginning with the Umayyad era (650–751).[196] With the coming of the Abbasids (751–1258) there was a process of even more intense Iranization of Islamic art, which was felt earlier on a political level with the decision to establish the new capital, Baghdad, in Mesopotamia, not far from the old centers of Sasanian power. In the ninth century the other capital, Samarra, which was later abandoned, had pictorial decorations that directly related to central Asian Iranian art.[197] Such work was enormously popular, at least until the twelfth century, even beyond the Islamic realm, which is particularly apparent in the paintings in the Palatine chapel in Palermo and in the duomo at Cefalù.[198] Animals or fantastic beings connected in some way with the Mazdean religion gradually were abandoned in the Islamic era, while others, such as the boar, were never accepted because of specific Islamic dietary proscriptions.

From an early date, goods from Persia and central Asia were highly valued by the ruling

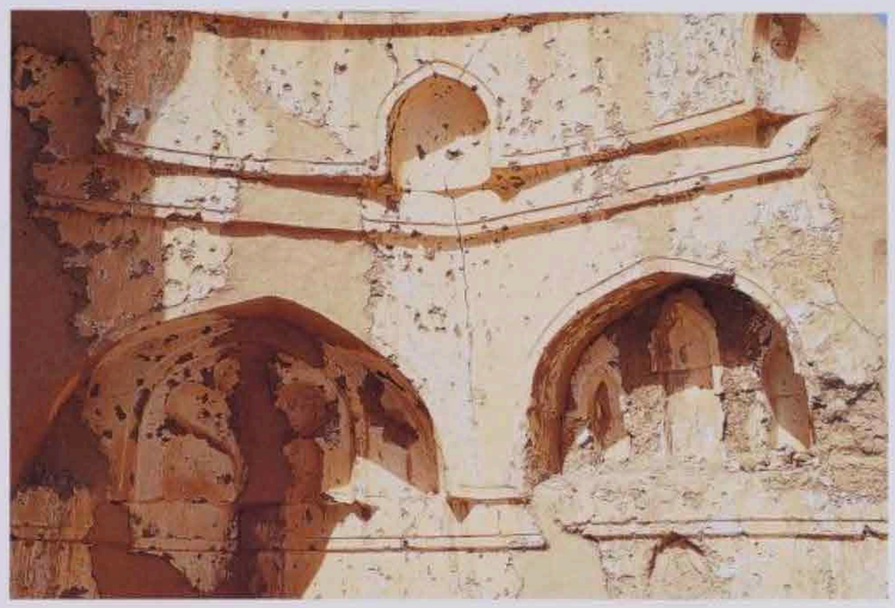
classes in China, Korea, and Japan.[199] Subsequently, elements of Iranian iconography appeared in Chinese art, especially following the introduction of Buddhism. The arrival of Firūz III, son of the last *Shahanshah*, Yazdegerd III, in Chang'an, the capital city, undoubtedly influenced Tang culture. Firūz was accompanied in exile by other Sasanian dignitaries and aristocrats, and many Persians, including Firūz himself, served in the army or at the Chinese court, where they were accorded treatment befitting their social status in their own country.[200] The opening up of Tang China to every type of exoticism had already encouraged numerous Iranian (especially Sogdian) merchants to settle within its borders. Religions such as Mazdeism, Manicheism, and Christianity were widespread in China, although not to the degree of Buddhism. Manicheism in particular was a means for the dissemination of a painting style closely linked to Sasanian Persia, as seen in the discoveries in Xinjiang.[201]

At this point it is legitimate to wonder why Sasanian art was so successful, even outside the boundaries of the Iranian world, and why it was so persistent—a bit like the "Moorish" Mudéjar art, which also prevailed within a "new" religious context—that its influence was still evident centuries after the extinction of the Sasanian dynasty by the Arabs (plates 98–100). Probably the medieval world was able to recycle the celebrative themes in Sasanian art, despite the fact that these could be interpreted—at least initially—in a Christian key in the West and in an Islamic key in the East. In fact, while conditions clearly existed for foreigners to observe the monumental works directly throughout the *Eranshahr*, such travelers were almost exclusively members of the diplomatic corps or occasional groups of viewers who normally would have found it impossible to penetrate an enemy country. As a result, the appreciation of the highest level of refinement achieved by works of Sasanian art and the assimilation of these forms outside Persia occurred above all through the spread of sumptuary objects such as silk, glass, jewelry, and metalwork—articles that would have had an impact on the dominant classes who wished to distinguish themselves from the common people through their access to luxury and their search for the most exotic (and costly) beauty available. As for the exportation of technical developments (for example the architectural vault), this was almost certainly a slower process, though facilitated by geographic proximity.

In any case it is appropriate to mention the development in Persian circles of a late antique sensibility (independent from incessant, particularly Hellenistic, contributions of techniques and iconography from the outside). This is an art that was never conceived as a mimesis of nature, but rather as its "soul," its "angel," or perhaps its psychic reflection. Plotinus understood this, although not necessarily consciously, as a *tertium* produced by an encounter between the intelligible and the perceivable, best expressed by the words of the Islamic Persian poet, Bidel: "the contagion of the imagination into the idea of the cosmos."

And so between the Sasanians and Islam there was no rupture; even the flight into India of the purest of the Zoroastrians is a myth that has been overblown and misdated. Aesthetic language remains the "subtle" dimension of the concrete world, best expressed in the so-called *Ode to the Soul* by Avicenna, a Muslim, but also a native of Chorasmia, an important and archetypal Iranian city.

Avicenna's poem is also a hymn to the pearl, but one that is pared down and shorn of folkloric elements, pointing instead to the purest form of monotheism, or as Bausani has

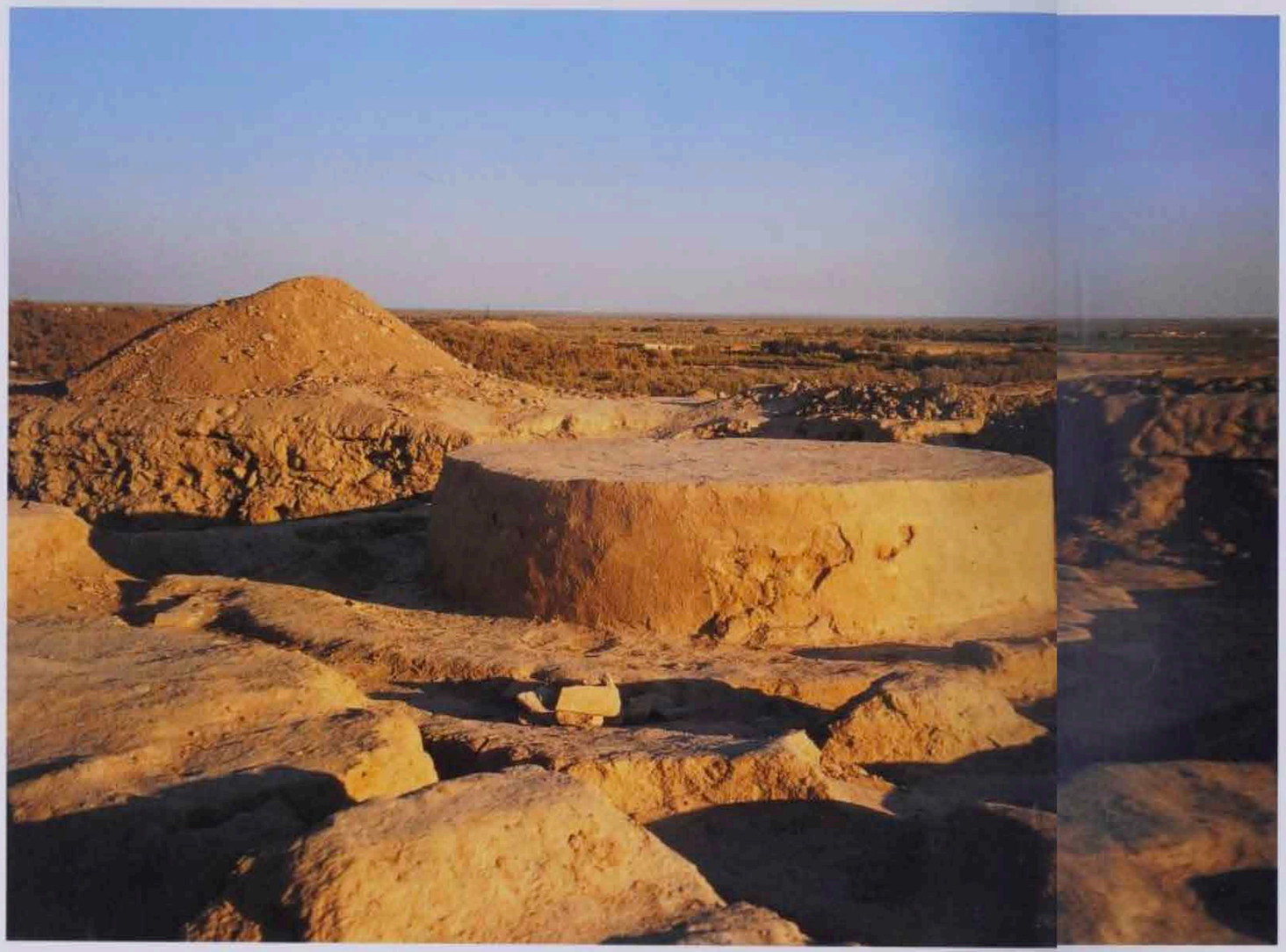


98. Building with a square plan and pendentives for accommodating the dome, at Fahraj, earliest Islamic period, see also plates 60 and 61

99. A pendentive with *muqarnas* decoration, Esfahān

frequently stated, to that "absolute theism" that clearly borders on, if not atheism, at least a subtle view of religiosity and human experience.

From the highest of places the glorious Dove, inaccessible saint, has descended upon you.
Concealed from every eye of Wisdom, yet it reveals itself uncovered, like a young girl unveiled.
Unwillingly, it reaches you, but defiantly would leave you again, tormented by sorrows.
It took refuge, disquieted at first, seized by shameful horror at the contact, but now joined with you, it has adapted slowly to the plains of this desolate desert.
Ah, surely I think it has forgotten the times when it fluttered in celestial gardens, and the sweet dwellings that, earlier, it was not resigned to leave.
Until, now joined with the D of its fatal Descent, separated from the C of its Center in the supreme lands.
It hangs on itself its heavy W of Weight, and here it is now amid deserted traces and ruins.
It weeps at the memory of cool dwellings in the sky, with eyes that know no limits to their tears.
And, like a cloud, bedewed with tears, traces of ancient dwellings, erased by the four-fold constant breath of the winds



Which entrap it in the densest of snares, and a cage keeps it from the boundless springtime peaks of the sky.
Until, when the day of journey toward its felicitous meadows draws near, and the time of departure for the broad plains approaches,
And it prepares to leave every vestige of the world, and its Earthly Companion, now rejected and deserted,
Dozes off slightly, and the veil is torn away, and reveals even that which sleeping eyes never perceive.
And then it chirps the sweetest songs on the highest branch (which Knowledge purifies and raises up all who are below).
But why did it descend from celestial heights into this profound abyss at the foot of the mountain?
If it were God who wanted to send it down below, with wisdom that the most assiduous and keenest of minds are impotent to ponder,

100. Base of the minaret of a mosque built at Paykand, near Bukhara, Uzbekistan, eighth century (?)

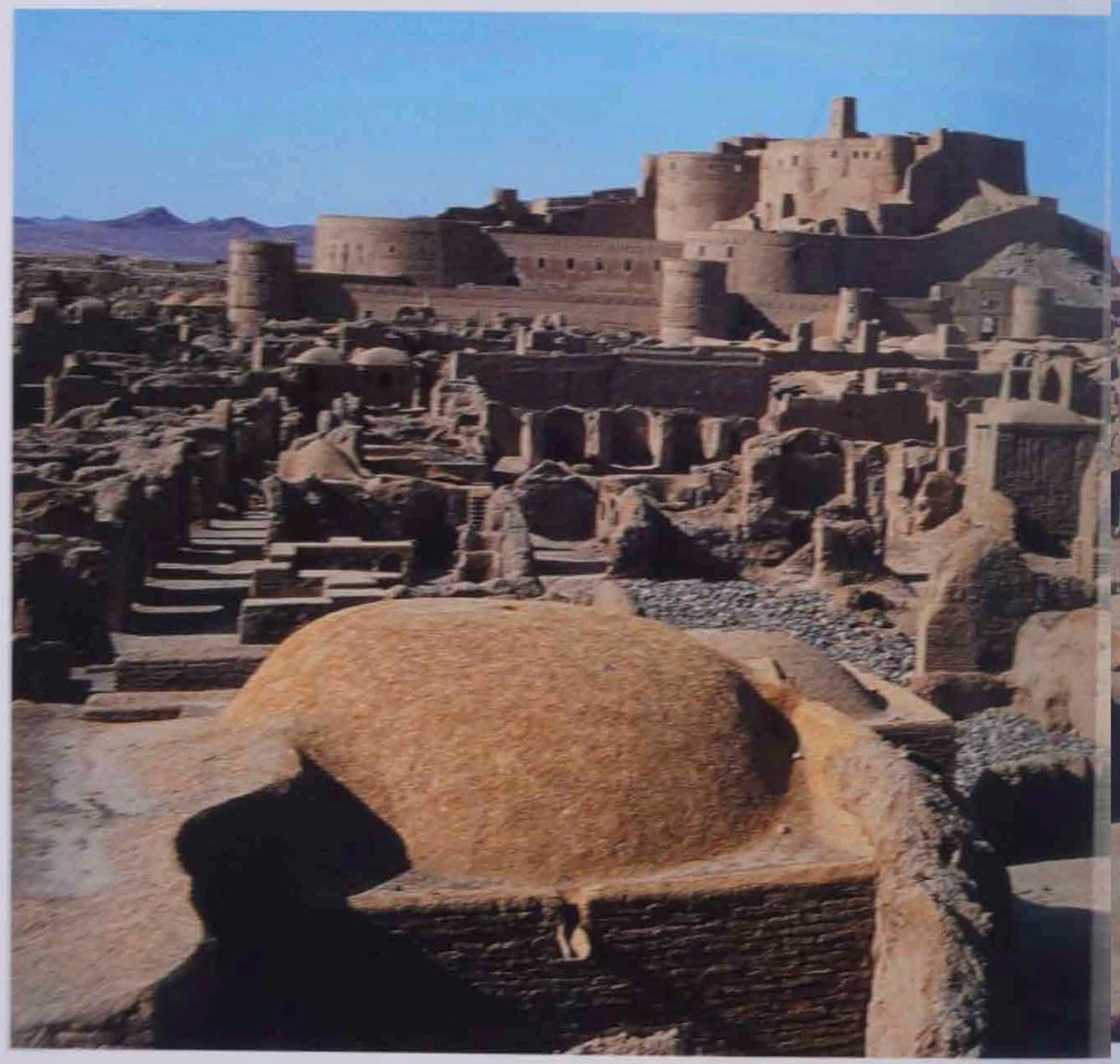
Clearly its descent was a harsh and binding law, *whereby it could listen to what it had never heard before,*
And it returned Home, knowing every secret hidden in the Cosmos, without rending its purest garments.
It is he for whom Time carved a path, until it faded into death, never again to rise to the world.
And it was like a lamp, which shines above the green meadow for an instant, then disperses, *and it is as if nothing had shone.*

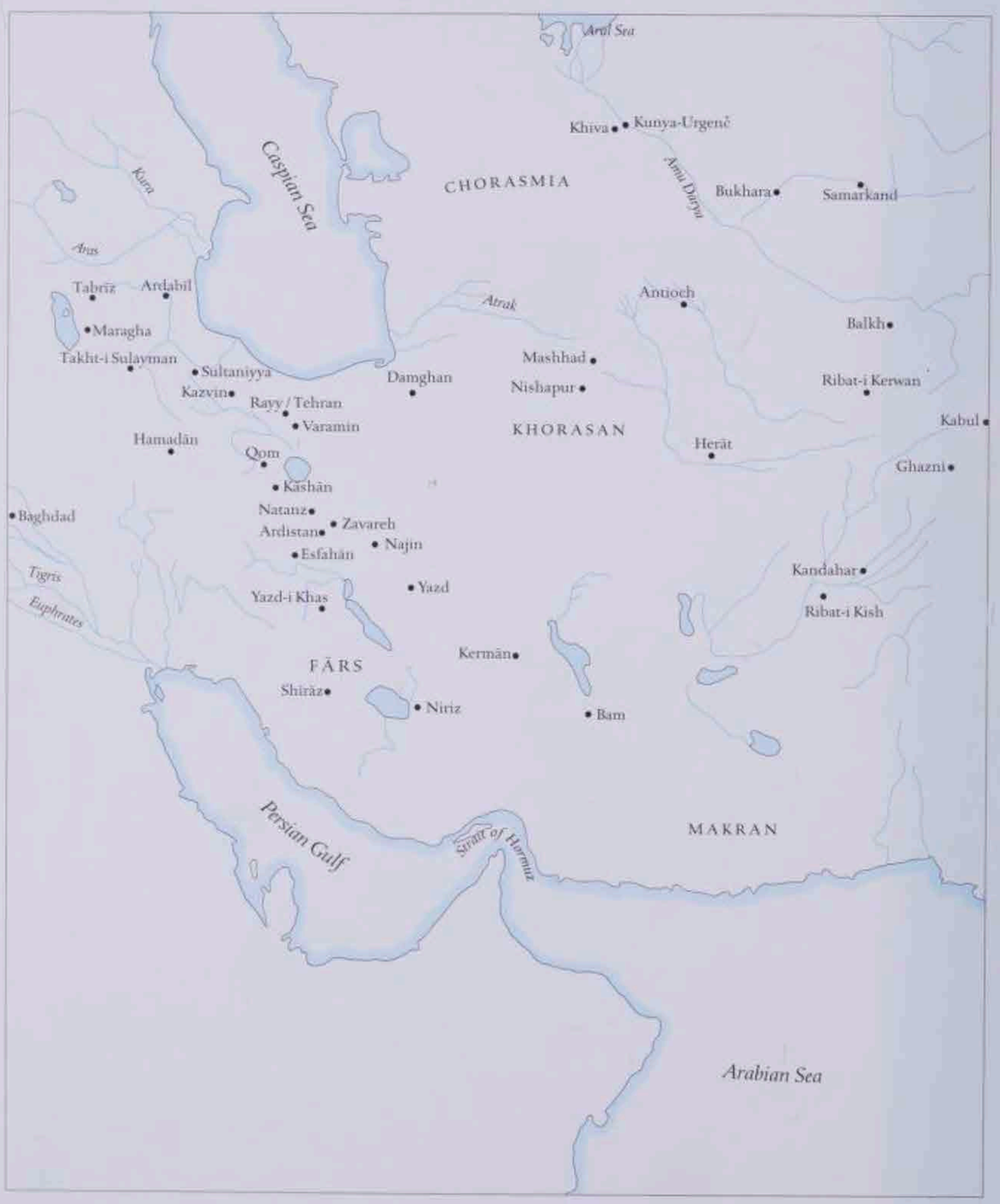
ISLAMIC PERSIA

SEVENTH–NINETEENTH CENTURY

Giovanni Curatola

xvi. Overall view of the citadel at Bam, dominated by the fortress, photographed before the citadel and most of the old quarter of Bam was flattened by a severe earthquake in 2003.



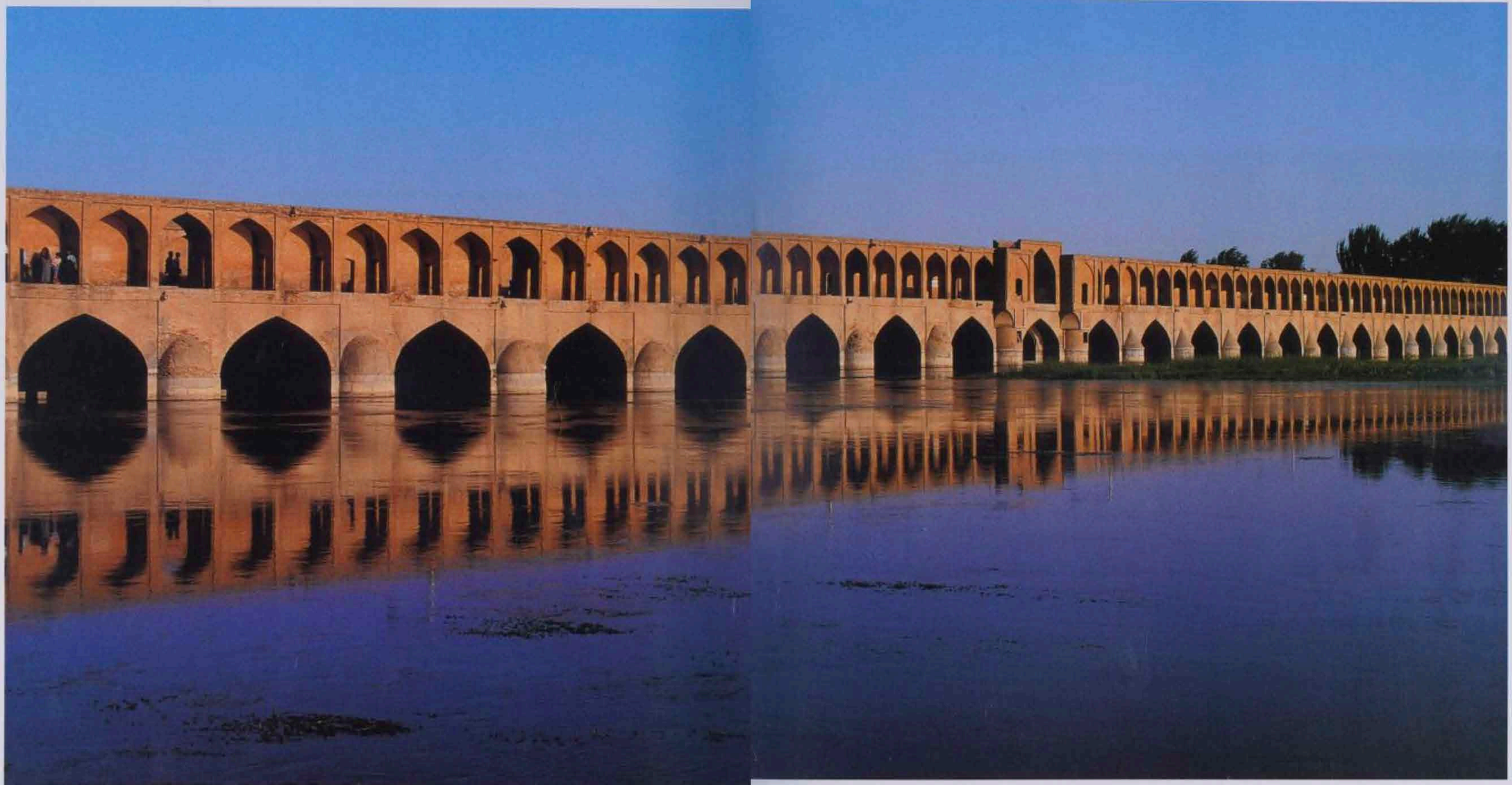


102. Islamic Persia (adapted from W. C. Bryce, *An Historical Atlas of Islam*, 1981)

INTRODUCTION

Within the multiform, complex, and variegated universe of Islamic art, contributions from Iran have played a continuous and crucial role—a situation that is so unquestionable and obvious that scholars have often turned their attention elsewhere.[1] At this point even experts feel a certain embarrassment speaking about Islamic art, as they do about Islam in general. While a few generalizations can be made where shared values override historical or minor differences, the West clearly has a blind spot about this culture, which is in fact multifaceted, with important and subtle variations.[2] In other words, Islam must be described in the plural, not the singular. Despite offshoots, there are cultural macro-regions of Islam: Spain and Morocco (with which Sicily should be grouped), Egypt and Syria, the Turkish world (another interesting terrain of syncretic experiences), Iran and central Asia (the latter still relatively unknown, and by no means simply an appendix to Persia), and India, with all its variations. Differences and similarities are anchored in a tenacious substratum over which the unifying mantle of Islam extends, symbolized by its most vital and dynamic precept: the pilgrimage to Mecca, an extraordinary occasion for exchange and a vehicle for acculturation, along with the continuous movement and overflow of energy, goods, and ideas.

Within this theater, Iran—in both the narrow sense of the Iranian nation and in the broader sense of the Iranian world as highlighted in the introduction to this book by Gianroberto Scarcia—holds a position of double centrality: geographic and cultural. And we need to remember that with its immense plateau with deserts, vast plains, and mountains—some of the highest in the world—Iran, even taken in the narrow sense, contains utterly different climates and regions. The Caspian zone, for example, is characterized in some places by intense rainfall. The Steppes and other regions, where cultural "pockets" formed, produced notable works as exemplified by the figurative art pottery created in Nishapur,[3] an ancient and rather important urban settlement in Khorāsān. At the other end of Iran is Fārs, the region from which the traditional name for the entire land of the Persians is derived. This is a rich territory, relatively close to the sea, with the Strait of Hormuz and nearby small islands that point in one direction toward the Arabian Peninsula and in the other toward the Indian subcontinent. Recent archaeological excavations have revealed the importance of the port city of Siraf,[4] a crucial trade center that is thought to have been responsible for the almost mythical expansion toward Africa.[5] In the

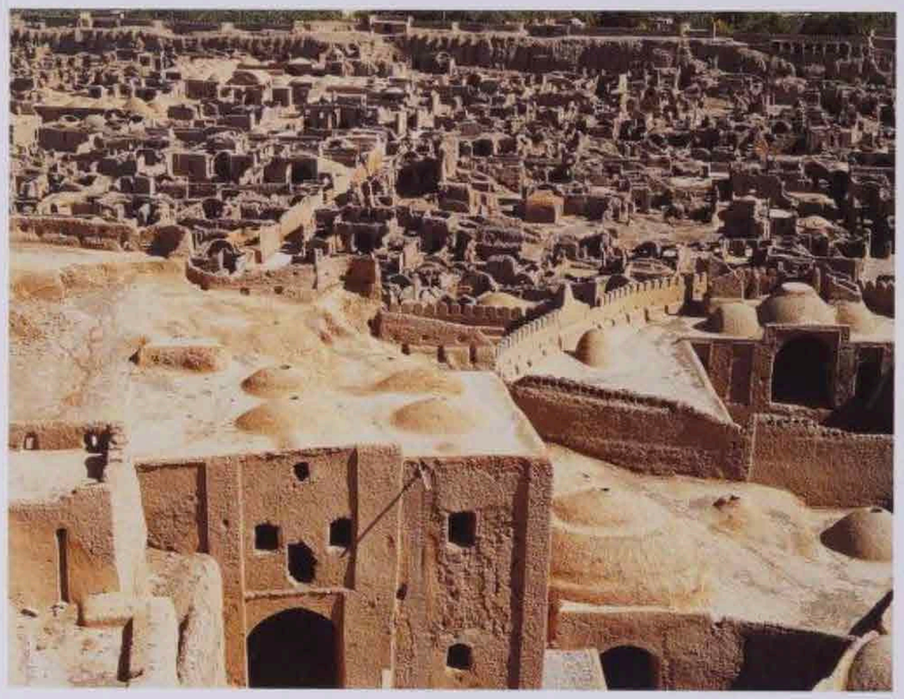


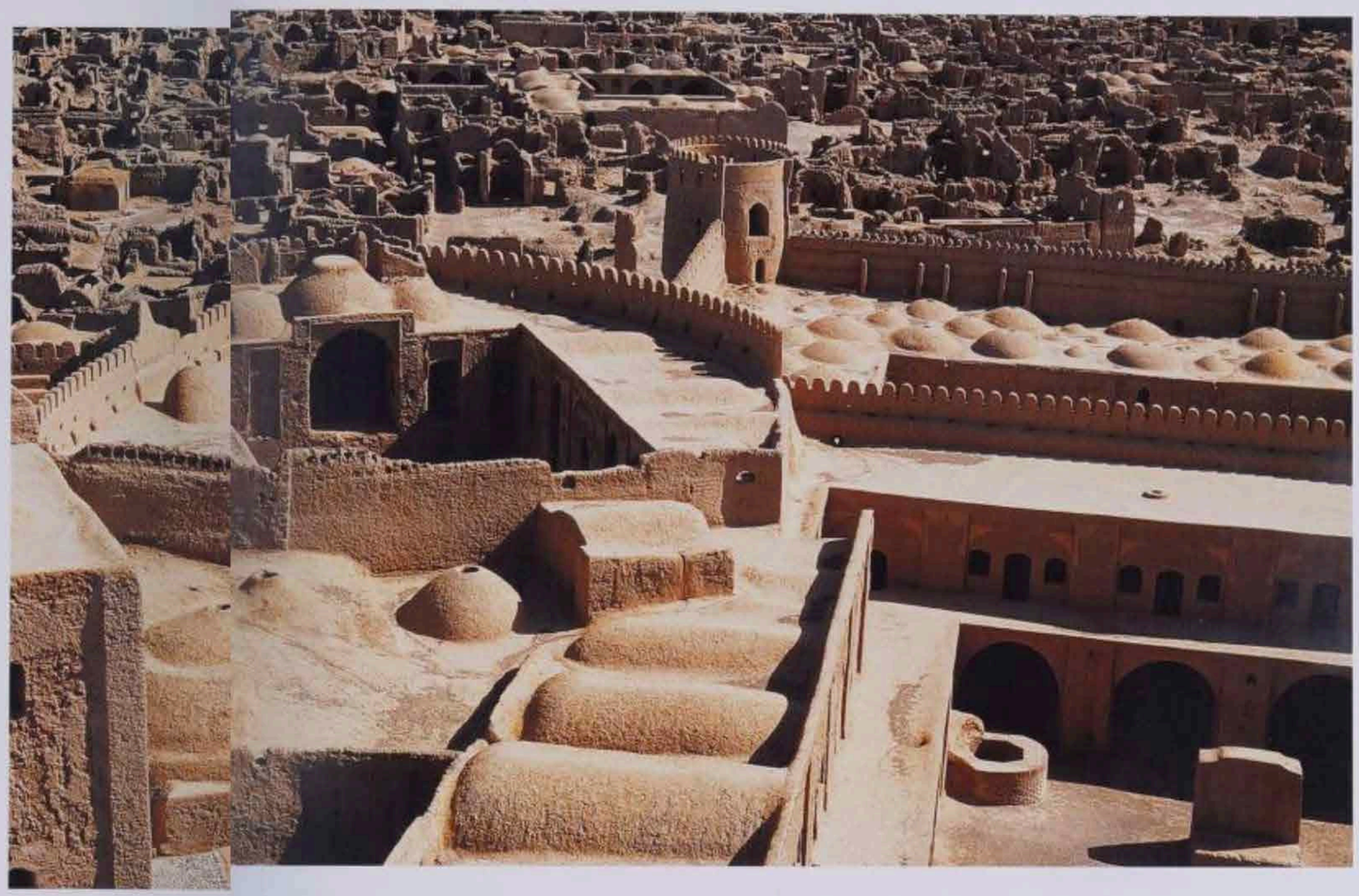
same way, Nishapur became very important in the 1930s as it was one of the few places to be properly investigated. We don't know how many other such sites have yet to be documented. Geographical diversity has always yielded cultural diversity. In ancient times Iran was already a pivotal point between central Asia, India, the Far East, and the Mediterranean basin. Thus it was a place of transit par excellence, but by no means a passive observation post. Indeed, it was a focal point that drew energy from the encounters and clashes with other civilizations that exerted an influence upon it, but which it influenced in turn, in a reciprocal play of mirrors. The Biblical Magi from the East were priests,[6] or in any case representatives or spokespersons, of another religious culture, but that legend is only a parable for the migrations of the great religions from Iran to the Mediterranean, causing us to wonder: who is the final recipient of this

103. The Si-o-Se Pol, the oldest bridge in Esfahān, the foundation of which dates to the Sasanian era; it also served as an ingenious dike to control the waters of the Zayanda Rud during periods of flooding. The bridge was fully restored during subsequent eras.

wisdom? It is clear that with Islam, the spread of ideas experienced a reversal, perfectly summed up in Islamic Iran. In other words, if the great Iranian river of ideas flowed into the Mediterranean, proving Alessandro Bausani's elegant assertion that cultural history is a westward movement, like that of the sun, then this river returned, enriched, to its sources.

Then the Bedouins appeared on the scene, although the term Bedouin is used somewhat inappropriately, in the same way that "barbarian" is used to denote those who invaded Rome of an already "universal" civilization. These were Arabs from the peninsula, only recently united by a shared Muslim faith and organized militarily in a manner that overcame their instinctive tribal identities, which, however, often resurfaced with a passion. They were keenly aware of the perils of becoming bogged down in wars of plunder, and instead felt a sense of duty to firmly





104–5. Bam: the fortress, the residential neighborhoods, and, in the background, the enclosing wall, as it stood before the 2003 earthquake

dominate vast territories. Their impact was enormous. It has often been written, and it is true, that Arab expansion turned westward toward the Byzantine Empire and eastward toward the Sasanian realm more or less simultaneously, but with different outcomes. While the Byzantine Empire was defeated and scaled back, it still remained an important and influential opposing power (as an organizational model, and in part as a model for court ritual and ceremony). The Sasanian world, on the other hand, experienced near total disintegration. Although it was defeated and politically humiliated, Iran did avenge itself, slowly but inexorably, in cultural and artistic spheres. There was resistance, clearly, and there were also important migratory flows, such as that of the Zoroastrians who went to India, where they established the Parsi community (although the period when this migration happened is demythicized, to a certain extent, in an earlier chapter). But the complexity of Iranian culture—profoundly assimilated in a manner that can occur only as a result of a centuries-long process, adapting and changing as needed—powerfully reemerged, no longer *masked* by Islam, as certain nationalistic currents would maintain, but *transformed* into Islam. This shift is essentially similar to what happened, of course with different terms, in Christian Rome, and it was possible not only because the strongly rooted Iranian indigenous tradition became refined over time, but also because Islam is a complex system. Islam is malleable and, once the "modern" dogma of God's absolute uniqueness is affirmed, capable of assimilating the most disparate customs and turning them to its own use. Better put, it is able to *unify* everything. It must be stressed once again: Islam is a pluralistic phenomenon, and one striking example of this is the *Shah-nama,* or Book of Kings, written around the year 1000 by Firdawsi (c. 935–1025/1026). It is a refined and fictionalized commemoration of the glory of the ancient Persian kings, written in the form and spirit of a Muslim chronicle. It is also filled with important philological and historical suggestions, which make it not only an epic romance, but also a key source, if viewed with caution. It is perhaps no accident that this "bestseller," which became a prototype for illuminated books of the Islamic era (discussed at length in the chapter on miniatures), was created in Khorāsān (Firdawsi was from the province of Nishapur). The *Shah-nama* seems to document how the Iranian paradigm, particularly in the Sasanian period, was intricately connected to regions well beyond Iran's natural borders via the famous "silk roads." It became a shared cultural patrimony, mythical and meaningful for all, regardless of the historical reality. The text unequivocally delineates the psychological need for a common ideological foundation, but in terms of its "illustration," that is to say its miniatures, special note must be made of Nezāmī (1141–1209) and his *Khamseh.*

Invasions from the east constitute another recurring and almost rhythmic motif in Iranian history. Apart from the Arabs, there was only one invasion, the Ottomans, from the west, since the Turks, having made Anatolia and the Balkans their adopted land, turned toward the Asian interior. Iran would experience invasions by the Seljuq Turks (eleventh to thirteenth century), the Mongols/Il-Khanids (thirteenth to fourteenth century), the Timurids (fourteenth to fifteenth century), and, in the first half of the sixteenth century, even the Afghans. Iranian civilization had long been solidly urban and agricultural, but following repeated military and political disturbances, it fell prey to nomadic tribal peoples. This encounter between two (and even

more) cultures resulted in a new kind of society. The architectural interventions at the Jum'a mosque in Esfahān, one of the most eminent buildings in the Islamic world, compellingly illustrate the transformations to which Iran, its people, and its important monuments have been subjected over the centuries. The *iwan* is a Parthian structure, and the *iwan* that preceeds a dome is a Sasanian one. Stucco, a widely employed decorative material, was of particularly high quality in Iran (polychrome marble was good, but stucco was more malleable, faster to work with, less expensive, and if it was painted with precision, many could not tell the difference between the final product and a marble panel), and while stucco was already popular under the Sasanians, it was the Muslims who truly disseminated its use. Moreover, stucco (a resistant, plaster-based mix), could be easily combined as a decorative material with *pise*, sun-baked mud brick, used for minor residential architecture, but also for more ambitious buildings. Covered with a watery mix of liquid mud and straw (*kahgil*), similar to plaster but used for more complex decoration, it is technologically perfect for regions where rainfall can be very heavy but of brief duration. Unbaked brick, an excellent insulating material in countries where there are great temperature extremes between winter and summer, offers even more, as it is elastic and thus a good defense against earthquakes. In a region traversed by a major seismic fault, this is not a small thing. We have already mentioned the invasions from the east; one of the most salient characteristics of the Iranian world was its capacity to absorb, really "Iranianize," the populations with which it came into contact. This happened with the Arabs in the seventh century and with the Mongols in the thirteenth century. The latter interaction is one of the most interesting in the entire history of Persian art. The Il-Khanid Mongols were not Muslims initially; they practiced a sort of combination of Buddhism, Hinduism, and shamanism, material traces of which still remain in the region around Sultaniyya (the "monastery" at Viar with a splendid dragon sculpted in stone,[7] the grottos at Behistan[8]). And they were open to the most disparate influences: some of the sovereigns' wives were Nestorian Christians, and Rashid al-Dīn, a vizier of exceptional acumen, had Jewish origins. Through the Mongols Far Eastern customs and beliefs profoundly penetrated central Asia and then Persia (pushing as far as Syria and Mamluk Egypt, which, however, was never conquered by the Mongols, although this would explain the decorative features that can be traced to Chinese and Hindu elements, in the Sultan Hasan mosque/madrassa in Cairo).[9] As early as the end of the thirteenth century, however, a pull was felt in the opposite direction, and the Il-Khanids experienced the entire spectrum of Islamic doctrines, from the Shiite persuasions of Oljeitu to the persecutions—recent converts were often more fervent than the king—of an intolerant Ghazan.

The sixteenth century was another fundamental period in Persian history, with the establishment of the Safavid dynasty by Shah Isma'il and the adoption of Shi'a Islam as the state religion. Indeed, this is when feelings of national identity arose, in a proto-modern sense. Clearly there were numerous stages—which we cannot go into in detail in this context—and the process was rooted in conditions of the past. But this was a turning point, and it is significant that more or less simultaneously, in the West and the East, two great imperial rivals—the Ottomans and the Mughals—were consolidating. The rivalry, partly territorial, between the Persians and the Ottomans was intense. By the first quarter of the sixteenth century the Ottomans controlled more or less all the sacred Islamic sites, and the Persians, under the brilliant leadership of Shah 'Abbās (1587–1629), responded by strengthening local alternatives: Qom, Mashhad, and Ardabīl (the latter in a sort of dynastic self-celebration). With the Mughals the Persians had a more comfortable coexistence, although there is evidence of willful Shiite infiltration in the Deccan region.[10] Imperial power was strongly centralized, and this was manifested through a very specific program of artistic display, nationalistic in nature, which exploited the earlier language and monumentality inherited from the grand style of Timur, turning it into a spectacle. This path was clarified by a sort of revolution in urban planning, with an emphasis on the theatrical, which transformed the capital of Esfahān into one of the most beautiful cities in the world at that time. However, this impetus toward national identity was not self-contained; indeed it was forcefully projected outward. In the seventeenth century Europe "discovered" Persia, resulting in frequent eastward voyages and missions, which in turn led to the publication of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721) and Rousseau's fascination with the region.

Even now, very little is known about the nineteenth century in Iran, an era of tremendous transformation and enormous interest. On the one hand, Europe made clear, massive inroads (introducing oil painting, for example), but on the other hand this was a period of neoclassical taste, which seemed to result almost spontaneously in neo-Achaemenid production. However, the process was not entirely spontaneous, but rather part of a constant Iranian tendency to archaize, as seen in the wooden mosques[11] in Shah Tahmasp, in the region of Marāgheh (northwestern Persia), and the *talar* (exterior colonnaded patios) of 'Ali Qapu and Chihil Sutun, to mention only two compelling examples. There were also *ta'ziye*, "sacred representations" inspired by the martyrdom of Hussayn, nephew of the Prophet; this original form of theater still survives and is a popular version of the feelings of rebellion against injustice that animate the Shiite movement.

Addressing a theme as vast as Islamic art in Persia necessitates the making of choices, some of them difficult. It means emphasizing and clarifying certain periods and monuments at the expense of others that are often no less worthy of attention. In following this path, we have sought to remain as balanced as possible, offering a general view, but one that does not neglect individual key episodes that might even be considered emblematic cases, capable of enlightening the whole picture. The main danger inherent in this choice is that one might fail to do justice to the breadth of solutions adopted (the citadel at Bam, before the terrible earthquake which severely destroyed a large part of it in 2003, with its astonishing mud-brick architecture, comes to mind—a veritable encyclopedic repertoire of built form, which should be required knowledge for anyone seeking to enter the architectural profession). There is also the risk that the many monuments and works mentioned will remain only names. This certainly was not the intention. The reader has the task to follow the suggested itineraries, traveling across one of the most complex, yet aesthetically gratifying and elevated cultures that the history of mankind has produced.

MUD, BRICK, AND TURQUOISE
THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERSIA

106. OPPOSITE. Facade of the south *iwan*, flanked by two minarets, at the Congregational Mosque (Masjid-i Jum'a), Esfahān

107. BELOW. Buyid column, Congregational Mosque, Esfahān

THE EARLY CENTURIES

The first major defeat of the Sasanian Empire at the hands of the invading Arab forces took place under the Sasanian King Yazdegerd III, at the battle of Al-Qadisiyya in 635, after a series of incursions using a highly successful technique typical of the "raid wars" that had taken a tremendous toll among the semi-nomadic Bedouin tribes.

The definitive conquest of Persia would come soon thereafter, in 642, with the battle of Nihawand. However, the transfer of power would be gradual and piecemeal among the various conquered regions. The chronology is significant, since the vast Persian Empire collapsed barely ten years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. This period was too brief for the newly formed Islamic faith to have established its own unequivocal and clear artistic language, especially if we consider that the two great defeated powers (Byzantine and Sasanian) would contribute toward constructing the artistic and aesthetic foundations for Islam.[1] Thus, Persian Islam would devote its efforts, over a long period of time, to converting preexisting structures at sites that were acceptable for the new prevailing ideology, although from an architectural standpoint this could not have been particularly clear, even to the new rulers.

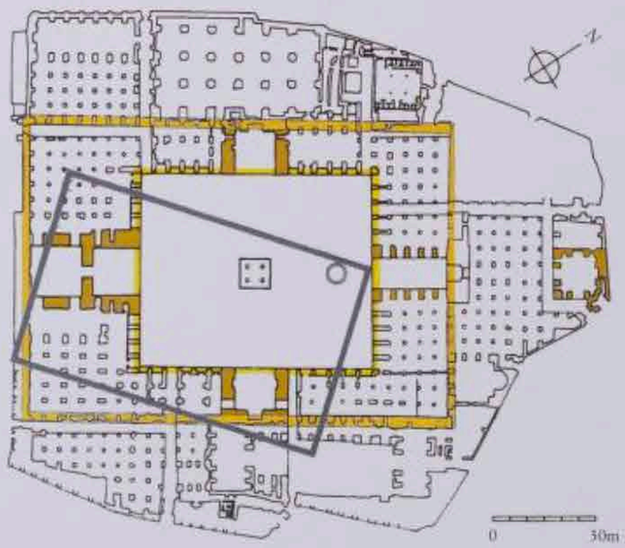
We know very little about the structures that were created anew, in part because those erected in the most important areas have undergone major alterations, leaving us with a false impression. In any event, we do know of fire temples that were transformed into domed halls to serve as mosques (the tenth-century Yazd-i Khast is an excellent example). We are also aware of isolated *iwans*, as at Niriz.[2] These were elements that were shared by the Sasanians and the Parthians. An *iwan* is a barrel-vaulted structure that has walls on three sides and is open on one side. In later periods, *iwan* ceilings would be highly embellished with *muqarnas*, stalactite-like structures or multiple honeycomb niches, the earliest extant example of which is the mausoleum of Arab Ata (977–78) at Tim in Transoxiana (present-day Uzbekistan). In addition to these, there were, obviously, newly constructed mosques. The custom of erecting a sanctuary or other building adapted to the observance of rituals and religious functions on the foundations of a preexisting structure was so widespread and universal that it hardly needs further mention or explanation.

We have been able to determine that by the end of the year 1000 there were no more than about thirty Islamic sites in Persia. This figure is indeed quite small when we consider that

nearly three centuries had passed, and research has not revealed that there was a lull in building activity during this period. The type of mosque generally found features a main prayer hall with hypostyle ceiling, a central courtyard, and *riwaq*, or porticoes, along the other walls, with a portal situated on an axis with the *mihrab* (a rule not always followed), and a single minaret, which was either affixed to the central edifice or freestanding. The hypostyle ceilings, often composed of a series of arches supporting small cupolas, were in part adapted from Sasanian architectural practices. The Sasanians had devised this structure also for climatic reasons: the topography of Iran is characterized by a central plateau at least 3,300 feet (c. 1,000 m) high, where snowfalls can be quite abundant. The weight of the snow, unless evenly distributed, would inevitably lead to the collapse of any extended, flat-roofed structure.

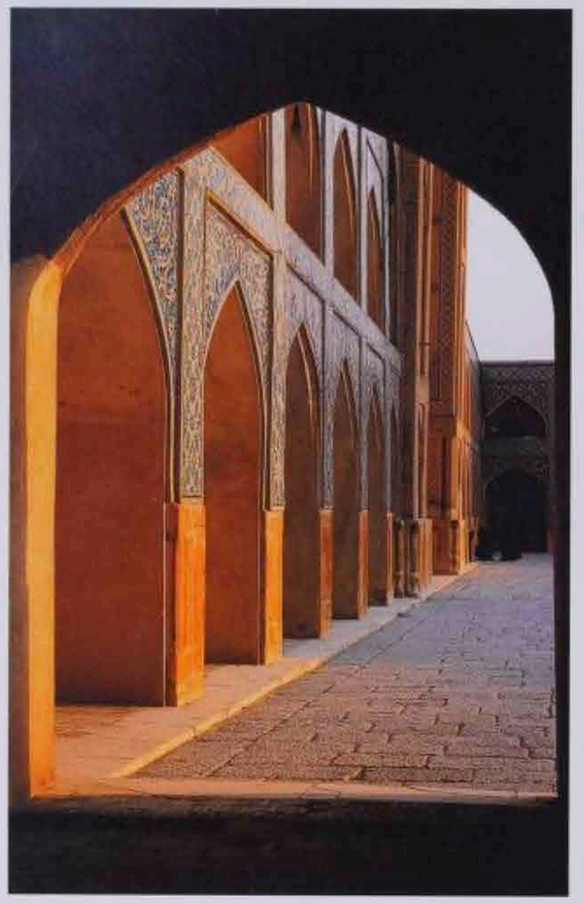
THE CONGREGATIONAL MOSQUE (MASJID) OF ESFAHĀN
CULMINATION OF THE GREAT ERAS OF PERSIAN ARCHITECTURE

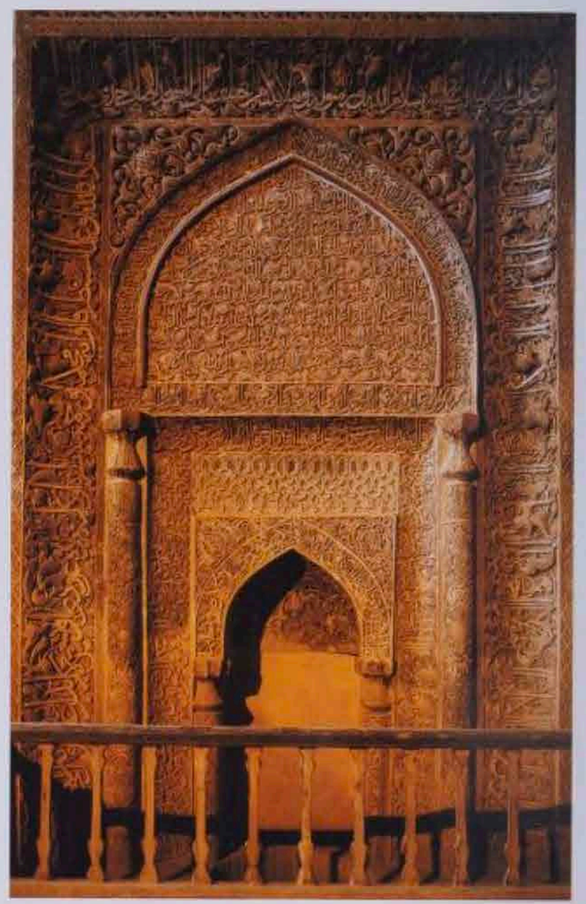
One of Persia's pivotal architectural monuments is the Congregational Mosque (Masjid-i Jum'a) of Esfahān (plates 109–110). This masterwork is now quite thoroughly understood, even in its more obscure phases, in large part due to systematic research undertaken by a team of Italian archaeologists.[3] Restoration work directed by Eugenio Galdieri has revealed some of the most minute details of this powerful yet highly intricate architectural complex.[4] This emblematic monument, with its various historical phases of construction, exemplifies the typological varieties found in Persian Islamic architecture, offering a paradigmatic journey through time and history (plate 108). Excavations conducted on the southern part of the mosque (in the great hall with its Seljuq vaulting, which houses the main *mihrab*, and in adjoining sections) have uncovered a massive Sasanian column with decorations in stucco, the only tangible indication of an important preexisting structure. The original building was erected in one of the villages

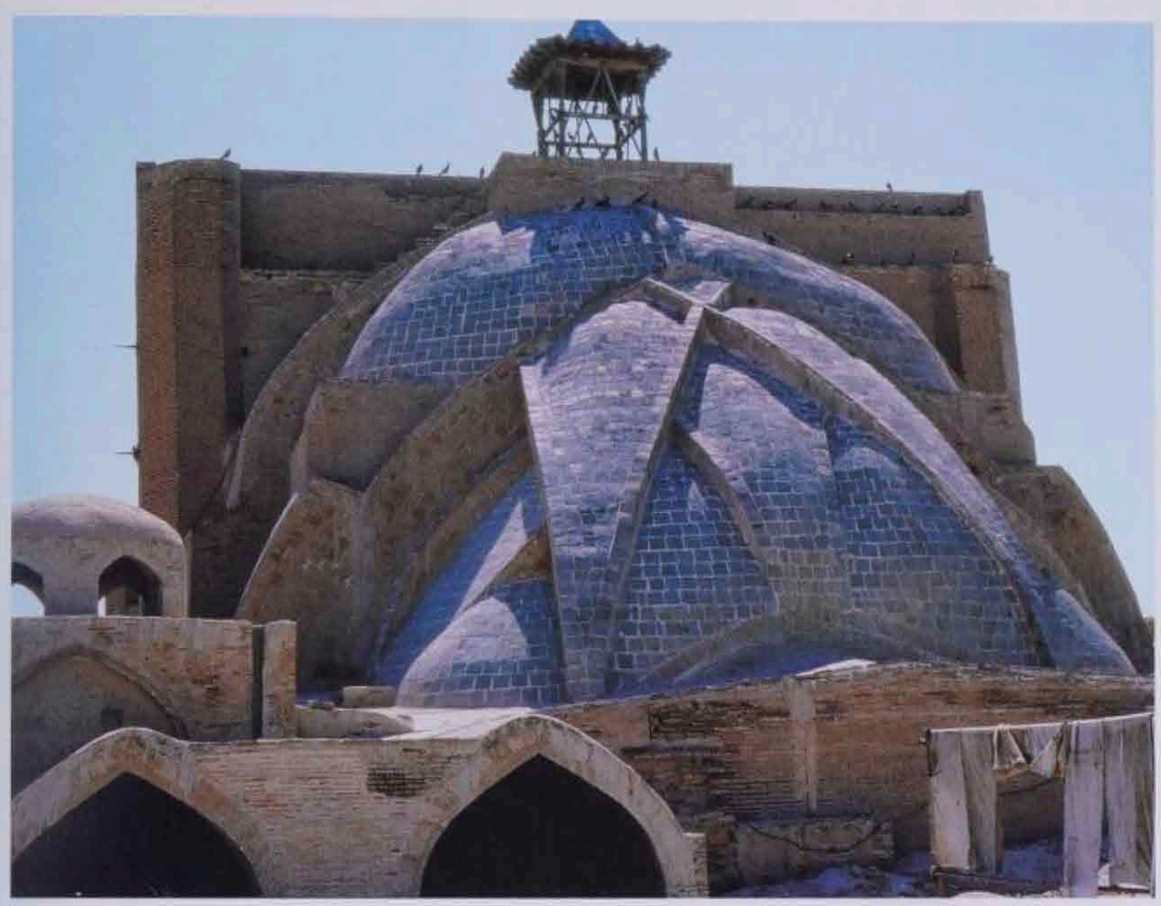


108. BELOW. Floor plan of the Congregational Mosque, Esfahān: various phases of construction are evident. From U. Scerrato, *Antica Persia. I tesori del Museo Nazionale di Tehran e la ricerca italiana*, 2001.

109. OPPOSITE. Seljuq quincunx, Congregational Mosque, Esfahān







(Yahudiyya) that would eventually coalesce to form Esfahān. Archaeologists have discovered copious remains of this village constructed of unfired brick. A literary source (Abu Nu'aym) supports the theory that the mosque here was built over a Nestorian church.

Few significant archaeological remains exist of the first mosque constructed during the Abbasid period in 772 during the last years of the caliphate of Al-Mansūr, the renowned creator of the circular plan of Baghdad, and some sixty years prior to the construction of Samarra. Calculations for setting the *qibla*—the orientation point for prayers and rituals toward Mecca—at this first mosque were erroneous—a stroke of fortune, since it has enabled us to unearth the remains of the original *mihrab*. The fragments of stucco decoration are difficult to discern and of little artistic importance, but they have tremendous historical significance. The left side of the unfired brick *qibla* wall has been lost outside the perimeters of the current structure, while on the right side two portions of the wall have been uncovered (during excavations in 1977); thus, we have been able to find the corner of the mosque, which we calculate occupied in breadth some one hundred cubits (one cubit is traditionally equivalent to about twenty inches or fifty centimeters). We can only hypothesize that the length of this structure might have extended nearly twice this distance, or two hundred cubits.

The wall sections that are intact, miraculously spared from some of the later transformations to this structure (particularly the insertion of heavily detailed Seljuq piers in the dome of Nizam al-Mulk has been done with extreme accuracy) are quite distinct from the *mihrab*. These sections, each measuring approximately twenty inches (50 cm) in length and forty inches (1 m) in height, are embellished with an extremely interesting and unique repertoire of floral motifs.

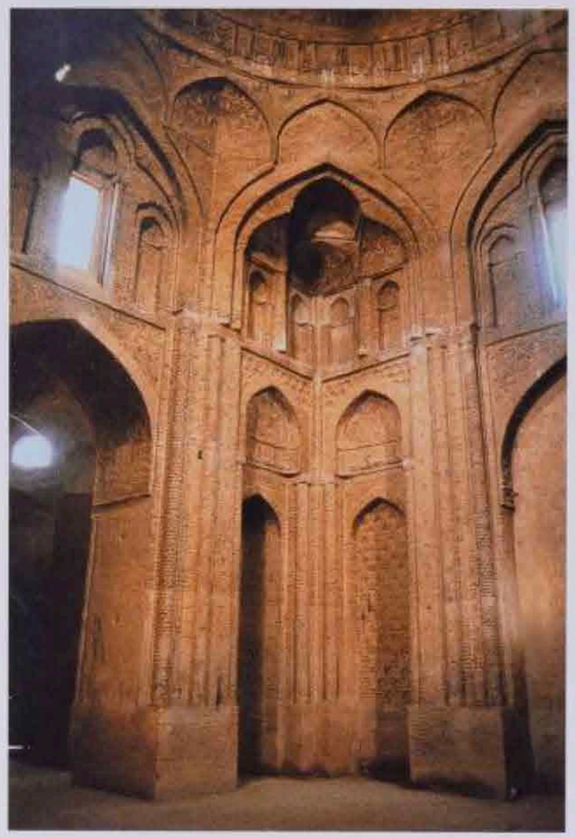
110. ABOVE, LEFT. Northern portico (*riwaq*), Congregational Mosque, Esfahān

111. ABOVE, RIGHT. Stucco *mihrab* constructed by the Mongol ruler Oljeitu, 1310, Congregational Mosque, Esfahān

112. View of the roof of the western *iwan*, with transverse ribs supporting the *muqarnas* of the roof cupola sheltering the hall below, Congregational Mosque, Esfahān

An ornate border along the base bears a continuous motif of four interlaced leaves that form a design of concentric diamond shapes with a small pierced disc at the center; the entire design is bordered by a continuous beaded ribbon band. The panels themselves, however, are even more exceptional. Here, a naturalistic floral motif features large palm leaf shapes, some lanceolated, some not. One can make out a classical shrubbery motif, which folds down on one side, and a spray of vines curled in a circle with opened leaves, or other, more symmetrical floral motifs. These reliefs show two clear influences, Sasanian and Mediterranean. An interesting parallel can be seen in the decorative stone sculpture work at the Umayyad Palace in the citadel of Amman. In any event, the real importance of these pieces is that they bridge a large gap in our knowledge of Islamic art in stucco prior to Samarra. The prayer hall of this first Abbasid mosque was also clearly hypostyle in design. In the later mosque structures from the Abbasid period, which have been dated from 840–841 (during the Caliphate of Al-Mu'tasim), alignment of the *qibla* wall would eventually be corrected, conforming to the present-day configuration.

The second mosque, also hypostyle, represents what is referred to as an "Arabian grid," with its *riwaq* and *sahn* (porticoes and central courtyard). The prayer hall is set off by a series of brick piers, while the perimeter wall is of unfired brick, as in the first mosque. Later changes date from the Būyid period (932 to 1028, in Esfahān), evidently prior to 979/980, given the reliable account of Abu'l Shayh, who died that year (it is sometimes necessary, with the Islamic lunar calendar, to indicate a two-year range). This intervention consisted of resurfacing the facades, thereby narrowing the entire courtyard on all four sides, with ornamental motifs composed of fired brick, arranged in geometric patterns on the surface of an engaged column at the end of a



pier. This structure was revealed by the fortunate restoration and conservation work conducted by Galdieri, documenting an architectural phase that would otherwise have remained hidden (plate 107). However, the more significant alteration, which is still largely visible, created the final architectural layout of what would become a highly complex structure—a Seljuq contribution, from the reign of Malik Shāh (r. 1072–1092). Vizier Nizām al-Mulk (1018–1092) had an imposing domed hall built in front of the *mihrab* (1086–87), which was originally intended (if the archaeological data supplied by Scerrato is correct), to be erected one span from the *mihrab*. This project was later abandoned in favor of a large pavilion, which was significantly more ambitious than what had been previously conceived in Islamic architecture, following a square floor plan that would surround the *mihrab*; three of its four sides were left freestanding. The structure would somehow be inserted into the hypostyle Abbasid complex, leading to various technical problems relating to the incorporation and harmonization of rather distinct architectural concepts. At a somewhat later point during the Seljuq period, the great *iwan* was built. Like the other three, this vaulted structure, which was placed in the midst of the porticoes facing the courtyard, followed designs (i.e. *iwan* that introduce a dome) that had been widely employed during the Sasanian period. From the Seljuq period onward, the four-*iwan* scheme would become the preferred, if not exclusive, design plan throughout the Iranian region, thus providing a singular point of reference for later Persian Islamic architecture.

The construction of another vaulted pavilion to the north of the mosque's northern *iwan* has been dated about 1088–89 according to a Kufic inscription (plates 113–14). The purpose of this structure, which was built by a rival of Nizam, Taj al-Mulk, is not entirely clear; however, it is likely that the pavilion served as a vestibule to be used by the sovereign when entering the mosque. These two domes, both employing simple fired brick, can be considered among the

113. ABOVE, LEFT. Detail of the wall and dome of Nizam al-Mulk, 1080, Congregational Mosque, Esfahān.

114. ABOVE, RIGHT. Cupola constructed by Taj al-Mulk, to the north of the mosque's northern *iwan*, 1088, Congregational Mosque, Esfahān

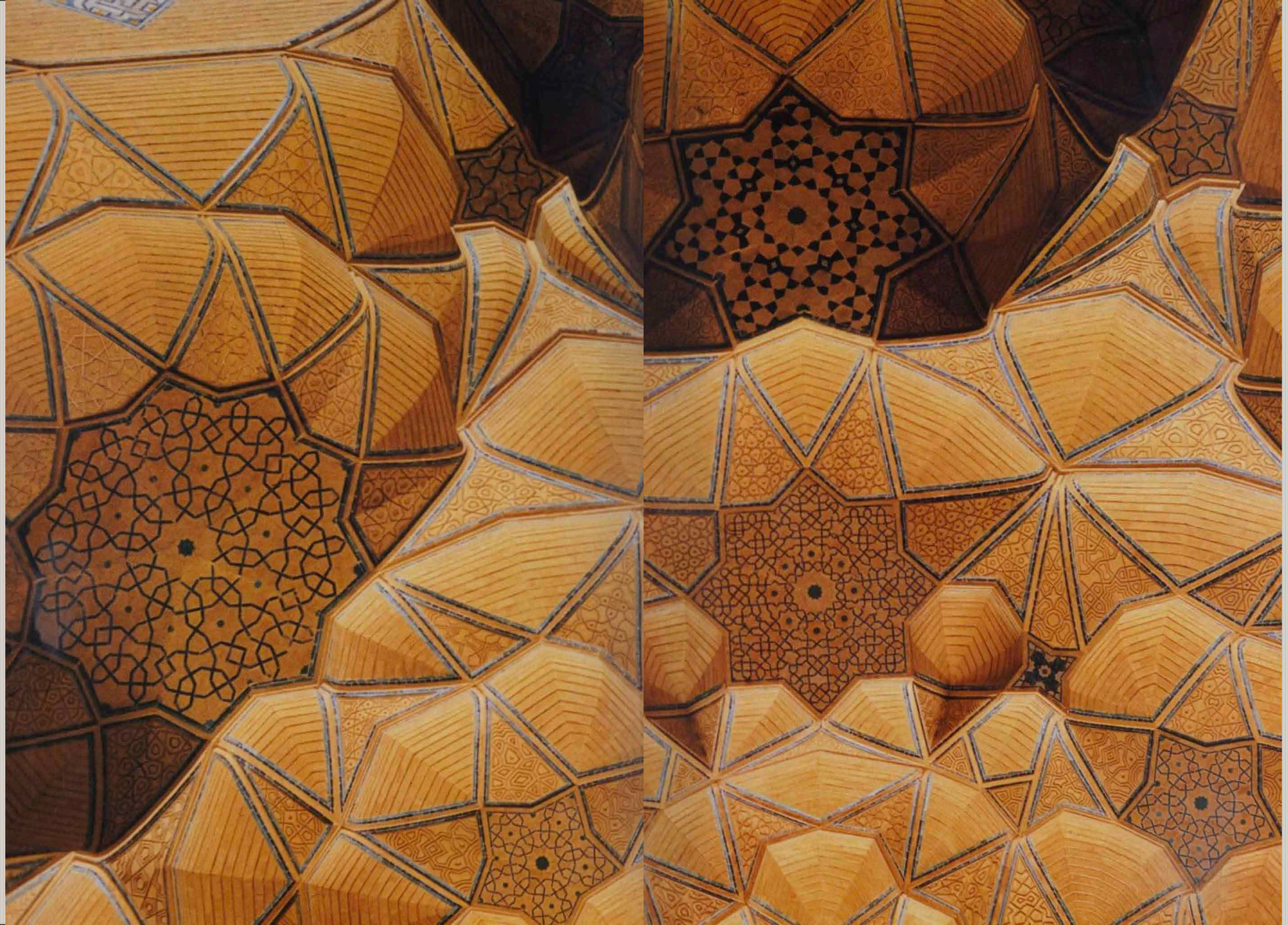
115. OVERLEAF. Soffit decorations of the eastern *iwan*, Congregational Mosque, Esfahān

greatest achievements of this type of architecture, both within and outside the Islamic world. The following description is provided by Robert Byron:

> The two-dome chambers of the Friday Mosque point this distinction by their difference. Both were built about the same time, at the end of the eleventh century. In the larger, which is the main sanctuary of the mosque, twelve massive piers engage in a Promethean struggle with the weight of the dome. The struggle in fact obscures the victory: to perceive the latter demands a previous interest in mediaeval engineering or the character of the Seljuqs. Contrast this with the smaller chamber, which is really a tomb-tower incorporated in the mosque. The inside is roughly thirty feet square (10 m) and sixty (20 m) high; its volume is perhaps one third of the other's. But while the larger lacked the experience necessary to its scale, the smaller embodies that precious moment between too little experience and too much, when the elements of construction have been refined of superfluous bulk, yet still withstand the allurements of superfluous grace; so that each element, like the muscles of a trained athlete, performs its function with winged precision, not concealing its effort, as over-refinement will do, but adjusting it to the highest degree of intellectual meaning. This is the perfection of architecture, attained not so much by the form of the elements—for this is a matter of convention—but by their chivalry of balance and proportion. And this small interior comes nearer to that perfection than I would have thought possible outside classical Europe.
>
> The very material is a signal of economy: hard small bricks of mousy grey, which swallow up the ornament of Kufic texts and stucco inlay in their puritan singleness of purpose.[5]

It was during the Seljuq period that certain formulations began to be fixed in Persian architecture. We know from an inscription that a main portal to the mosque was constructed in 1121/1122. Work began somewhat later, according to a rather complex chronology, on the hall abutting the western *iwan* (plate 112), which was constructed in various phases. A Seljuq wall panel along the side passage of the eastern *iwan* (plate 115) bears a series of seals containing the ninety-nine names of God, as well as other Shiite invocations.[6] It is interesting that these inscriptions also include a verse by the renowned Shirazian poet Hafiz (c. 1325–c. 1390).

It is here, in the hall behind the Western *iwan*, that we find the most significant alterations from the Il-Khanid period: the *mihrab* with its stucco volutes constructed by Oljeitu in 1310 (plate 111).[7] The exceptional craftsmanship of this *mihrab* is evident in the decorative repertoire found on three principles, which form a microcosm of Islamic ornamentation: calligraphy, geometric motifs, and arabesques, all in perfect harmony without interfering with the powerful polychromy, now barely visible in several faded sections (the polychromy was verified by studying various stucco fragments during the archaeological intervention). Interestingly, Oljeitu's *mihrab* (which was executed by 'Adub bin 'Ali al-Mastari) contains no Koranic inscriptions, only dedications exalting the reign of the sultan. The nature and location of these inscriptions in more peripheral surroundings suggest a self-celebratory motive: to leave his imprint on one of the most important monuments of Islamic architecture, during a time when Oljeitu was fascinated by the Shiite faith.



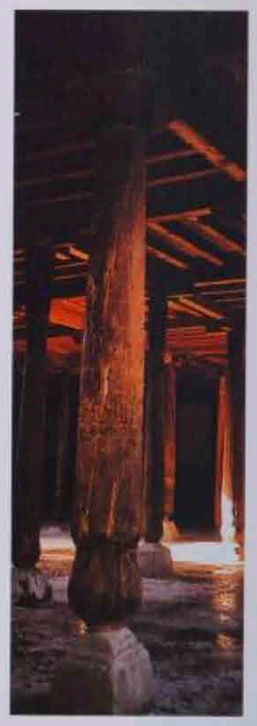
An Il-Khanid intervention is also found in the great dome of Nizam al-Mulk. Perhaps the engineering of the space was deemed risky, for the area between the central piers that support the dome has been reinforced. And the cube below, up to the dome, was covered in a white stucco wash, with noticeable morphological alterations, including at the junctures superimposed triple niches, which do not correspond to the original layout. The architect Eugenio Galdieri is largely responsible for documenting and preserving this alteration, during the works done to restore the original Seljuq floor level. Interventions occurring during the Muzaffarid dynasty (1314–1393; in Esfahān, from 1358 to 1375, under the reign of Sultan Mahmud) were both structural, with the construction of a *madrasah* on the eastern side of the mosque, and decorative,[8] with the insertion of ceramic panels in the southern *iwan*; additionally, the restoration of the *iwan* dome is attributed to Aq Qoyunlu Uzun Hasan in 1475–1476.

More limited, essentially decorative, Timurid alterations to the structure include the lavish onyx tiling which was installed in the southern *iwan* and on the dome of Nizam al-Mulk (removed during excavations and reconstruction work on the historically most recent southwestern section of the mosque), as well as exquisite corner piers, also in onyx, which were added to the courtyard. Another Timurid addition may include the *shabestan* (summer prayer hall), documented in an inscription dated 1447. This structure, located behind the western *iwan*, features superb depressed arches, which are generally attributed to the Safavid period.[9] There are numerous Safavid inscriptions in the ceramic facades of the courtyard, which bear the names of Shah Tahmasp (1531–1532) and Shah 'Abbas II (1642–1667). The two slender minarets that flank the southern dome (plate 106), positioned at the sides of the *iwan* facade, are also Safavid. Numerous changes, more spontaneous than coordinated, occurred in the nineteenth century, well before the more systematic restorations of the 1970s and 1980s.

FROM THE ABBASID TO THE BŪYID ERA

Having examined such a vast architectural complexity, with its range of styles, materials, and interventions, we can now proceed to a survey of the most important periods of Persian architecture. The Tarik Khana Mosque in Damghan,[10] which dates from the Abbasid period (eighth century)—probably the oldest extant Persian mosque—offers a perfect starting point (plate 117). The structure is quite simple, with its courtyard, porticoes, and three-bayed hypostyle prayer hall in front of the *mihrab* (the central nave being wider and higher than the rest of the complex). The mosque is typically "Arabic" in design, however, expressive of a language heavily infused with Sasanian components: massive piers, circular columns in stucco-faced brick, and pointed arches. All of these elements hint at an expressive continuity that deserves further investigation. As for massive columns, it is impossible to overlook the mosque of Degaran, in the village of Hazara (Transoxiana), which dates to some time around the year 1000. The earliest traditions of hypostyle architecture in central Asia (in Chorasmia, for example) are found in such important monuments as the Congregational Mosque in Khiva (tenth century, although heavily renovated in the eighteenth century), with its characteristic use of wooden colonnades (plate 116).[11] Further to the east (in Kazakhstan, for example) similar linear column arrangements can also be seen, as in the mausoleum of Arestan Bab.[12] Although dating from the thirteenth or fourteenth century, this structure has a decidedly older appearance, the result of extreme conservatism or a tendency toward conscious archaisms, a trend that intermittently occurs at sites that are both geographically and chronologically distant from each other.

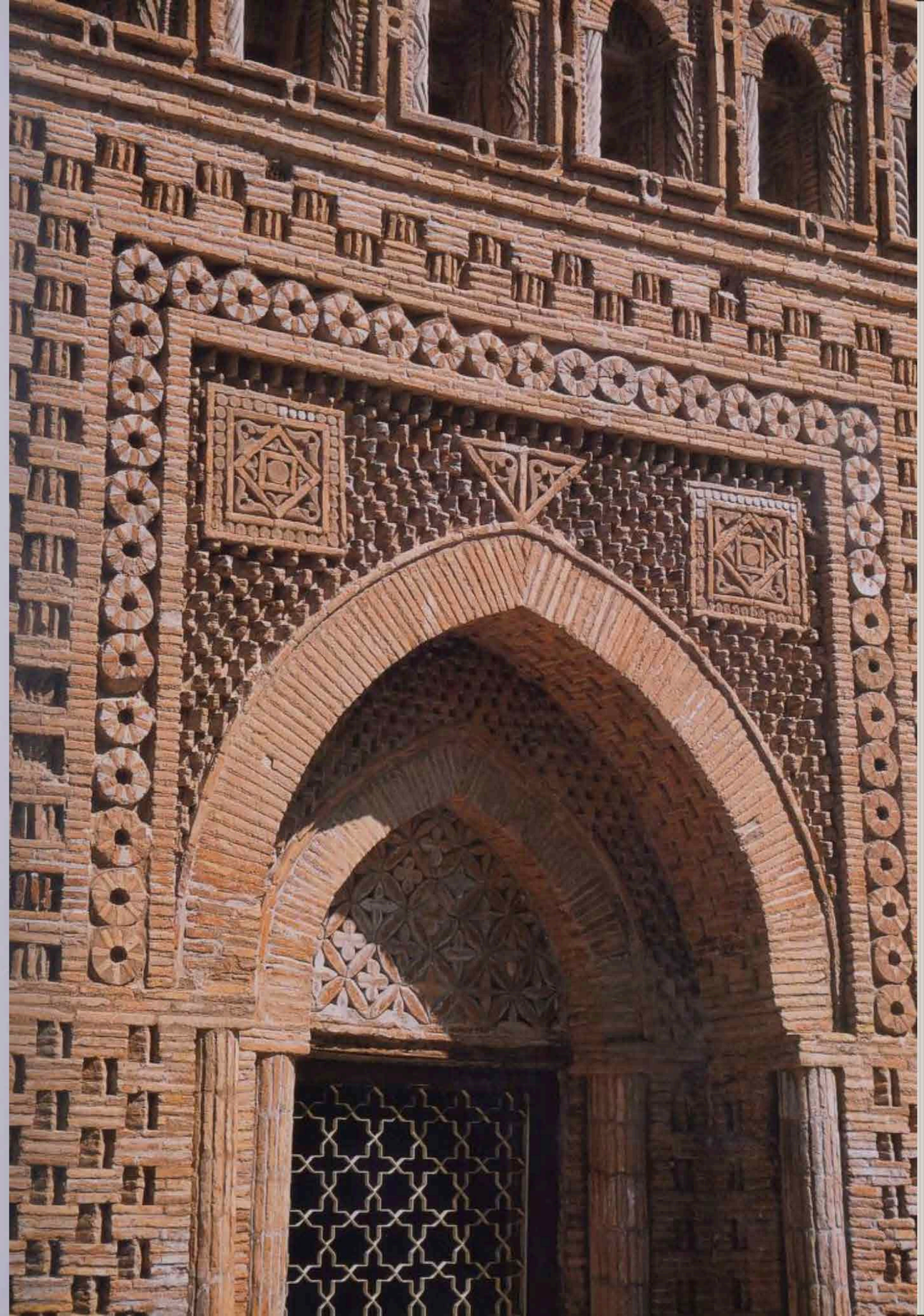
116. Colonnades, Congregational Mosque, Khiva



117. The imposing piers in the hall of the Semnan Congregational Mosque (Masjid-i Jum'a), in Khorāsān. Recent restorations have revealed a structure quite similar to the mosque in Damghan.

Returning again to Iran, the mosque of Fahraj in the vicinity of Yazd,[13] although less monumental since it served a smaller community, also exhibits great stylistic diversity. The building, which is not as old, is based on a similar floor plan: here, a cylindrical minaret is set to one side of the courtyard arcades. Fahraj provides a rare example—like the paradigmatic mosque of Esfahān—of Islamic design imported into Persia, in this case in the construction of a completely new mosque. An analogous case is the destroyed mosque of Dezful, which was already subjected to profound modifications. It was further to the east, in such places as Khorāsān, Afghanistan, and central Asia, an area that became increasingly important, that we find structures of greater interest. The remains of the Mosque of Hagi Piyade in Balkh[14] (present-day northern Afghanistan, not far from the valleys of Amu Darya, the ancient Oxus) seem simplistic: a square structure, with three closed sides and one open side opposite to the *mihrab*, which rests upon sixteen massive round piers supporting a series of arches and domed ceilings (now absent). The massive columns again reflect a Sasanian construction; however, it is interesting that the closest architectural analogy (also closest chronologically, since the mosque in Balkh dates from the late ninth to early tenth century) should be so distant geographically: the mosque/sanctuary of Bab-i Mardom in Toledo (Iglesia de Cristo de la Luz, 1085).

The vicissitudes of history subjected Iran to a series of invasions from the east. The Būyid dynasty was extremely important in Iran, since it is the first occurrence that a local potentate emerged within a territory otherwise entirely dominated by Arab rule, thus representing something of a national interlude prior to the arrival of the Turkish Seljuqs from central Asia. The Būyids controlled the country from 932 to 1055; however, their influence varied from one region to another, without any overall unifying scheme (Esfahān, for example, was only under Būyid rule from 932 to 1028). There were various rival powers, such as the Sāmānids in Khorāsān



118–119. ABOVE.
The Isma'il Mausoleum in Bukhara, with details of the front facade (OPPOSITE)

and Transoxiana (819–1005), and the Turkish Ghaznavids (977–1186)[15] in Khorāsān, Afghanistan, and India, as well as the Ghūrids (northwestern Afghanistan, 1000–1214). This rather fluid situation was marked by one clear and incontrovertible truth: the importance of the eastern territories within the caliphate.

Among the most celebrated monuments of central Asia, also Iranian in influence, is the mausoleum of the Sāmānid Isma'il in Bukhara (plates 118–119, c. 943, according to a stone engraving mentioning As-Said Nasr II (r. 914–43)),[16] built entirely of fired brick. The structure merits further description, since it is the most renowned mausoleum after the Qubbat As-Sulaibiya in Samarra,[17] the first building known to have been constructed for such a purpose in Islam. The prophet Muhammad condemned sepulchral display (following suggested provisions for his funerary arrangements), although he never issued any specific prohibitions. The Bukhara mausoleum follows a square floor plan, featuring four doors at the center of each of its sides (according to tradition, this was to ensure that the tomb would not be situated in an "open" space) and also a dome. The exterior corners are embellished with engaged columns inserted beneath four small recessed domes; a series of windows runs along the four sides opening onto an interior gallery. The severity of this massive cubic structure is offset by the corner columns and the small windows, and, most strikingly, by the brilliant use of decorative brickwork on the facade, framed by a pierced circle motif, similar to the beaded patterns of Sasanian stuccowork and textiles, but on a much larger scale. The overall visual effect echoes the texture of woven fabric or perhaps the plaiting of wicker or straw. The same repertoire of decorative brickwork is used in the interior, and the corner solution of the passage from the cubic floor plan to the dome is supplied by an elegant tripartite arch. As succinctly described by Robert Hillenbrand, the structure is a "fire temple in Islamic dress;"[18] comparisons to Kunar Siyah immediately come

to mind. The mausoleum is interestingly devoid of stucco, which here would seem superfluous amid the brilliant brickwork.

The Congregational Mosque of Nayin (plate 120),[19] in central Iran, also dates from the Būyid period (tenth century), and those stylistic features are still quite visible in its plan, despite subsequent alterations. The structure of the central courtyard, which includes a stairway leading to the *qanat*[20] (a subterranean channel supplying mountain water through the use of a powerful hydraulic engineering system), indicates that the building underwent expansions along the sides, while still conserving the original "Arabic" floor design. A subsequently modified minaret is perhaps the oldest such structure in Iran. Reinforcement work on the building has "freed up" a series of rounded engaged columns on the courtyard facade, which are embellished with interwoven brickwork, a hallmark of Būyid architecture also found on the Masjid-i Jum'a in Esfahān. But the most striking feature of this mosque is the decorative stucco relief work employed in the *mihrab*, and on the supporting columns (plate 121) and arches of the prayer hall. The motifs are taken from a repertoire of religious inscriptions (in the *mihrab*) and floral elements. Minutely detailed vine leaves grace the lunette above the *qibla* niche. The motifs on the imposing columns, which also feature stylized vine leaves and grapes, as well as bands with geometric patterns and bead motifs reminiscent of woven textiles, form a stylistic link with the persistent Sasanian tradition, even if the Abbasid contributions seem evident, as is clear in a comparison of these styles with the stuccowork at Samarra.[21] The vestiges of the Jurjir Mosque in Esfahān,[22] mainly the entrance, are Būyid in dating (c. 985) and decorative style. The use of dazzling interlaced brickwork serves as a prelude and indispensable introduction to the masterful works of the Seljuqs.

Eastern Persia, in the city now known as Gonbad-e Qabus, contains one of the most extraordinary and idiosyncratic monuments of medieval Islam,[23] the mausoleum of the Ziyarid Sultan Qabus ibn Wushmagir ibn Ziyar (plate 123). The sultan was evidently a man of notori-

120. ABOVE. The tenth-century Congregational Mosque (Masjid-i Jum'a), Nayin

121. OPPOSITE. Detail of decorative stuccowork on a column, demonstrating Sasanian influence, Congegational Mosque, Nayin

ous cruelty, although he was also a poet, calligrapher, and astronomer, and his court served as a refuge for Avicenna and al-Bīrūnī. The perfectly smooth exterior surface of the mausoleum, composed of a cylindrical brick tower (167 feet [51 m] tall) and conical roof, is interrupted by ten inset buttresses formed by triangular sections, with two bands of Kufic inscriptions running above the ceiling and along the base of the structure. This utterly unique building has spawned a wide range of stories and legends. One such legend held that the sharp buttress edges were devised to repel the *jinns* (evil genies referred to in the Koran, in whose language Solomon was alleged to have been versed). Another, which claimed a coffin—originally fashioned from crystal—was suspended midair to catch and reflect the midday sunlight, certainly homage to Qabus' renown as an astronomer. The shape of this mausoleum served as inspiration for two minarets in Ghazni[24] (central Afghanistan), the first built by Mas'ud III (plate 122, 1114–15) and the second by Bahrām Shāh (1118–52), both Ghaznavid rulers. The minarets are all that remain of two rather impressive mosques. The main construction material is fired brick, again displaying intricately intertwined geometric patterns, as well as strikingly beautiful inscriptions. The minaret of Jam, which rises in stark isolation above a riverbank,[25] is also in Afghanistan. This structure, some 210 feet (65 m) in height, rests on an octagonal base and contains a double set of spiral staircases. The minaret is adorned with rather elaborate and sumptuous decoration, reflecting an underlying sense of *horror vacui*. Decorative motifs are essentially geometric[26] or epigraphic, and an inscription refers to the name of the patron, Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad (a Ghūrid sultan who ruled from 1163 to 1203). One of the most significant elements is the insertion of a still-visible inscription executed in turquoise ceramic tiles just below the crown of *muqarnas*, which serves as a transition from the first to the second stages of the shaft. These minarets (the logical antecedents for the Qutb Minar in Delhi, dating from 1199)[27] might have been part of a complex surveillance and sighting system, as has been recently proposed.[28] In this context, the minaret of Kirat (southern Khorāsān, tenth century)[29] is significant, with its high octagonal base and cylindrical shaft, typologically quite similar to the structure at Jam. The Kirat minaret is also adorned with decorative stuccowork. Other important minarets include the Seljuq construction at the Congregational Mosque of Saveh (1110)[30] and the famed minaret of Bukhara,[31] a fired brick structure rising 150 feet (46 m) and dating from 1127.

The importance of the Afghan sites is confirmed by the remains of the palaces of Mas'ud III in Ghazni[32] and at Lashkar-i Bazar,[33] where the palace structures were schematically adapted to include *iwans* arranged on an axis around the courtyard (also used in western Islamic architecture, such as the Ukhaydir Palace in present-day Iraq). The inner walls at Lashkar-i Bazar were also refaced with stucco and decorated with the images of various personages: a profile view of the lower part of a body, a frontal view of a bust, and three-quarter depictions of a face, all of which follow a classical pre-Islamic scheme. This is one of the most important extant examples of figurative mural imagery in Persian art.[34]

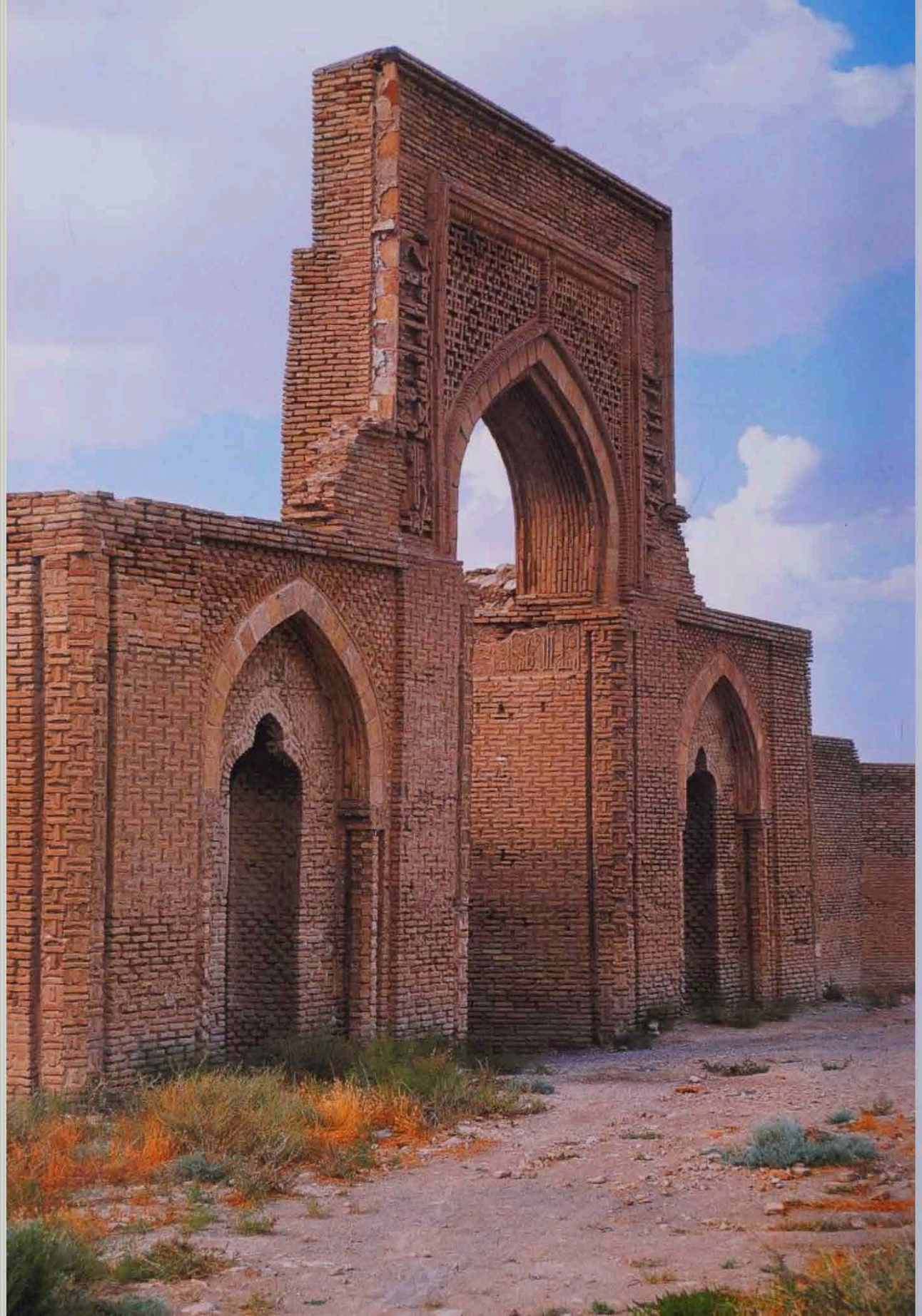
THE SELJUQS

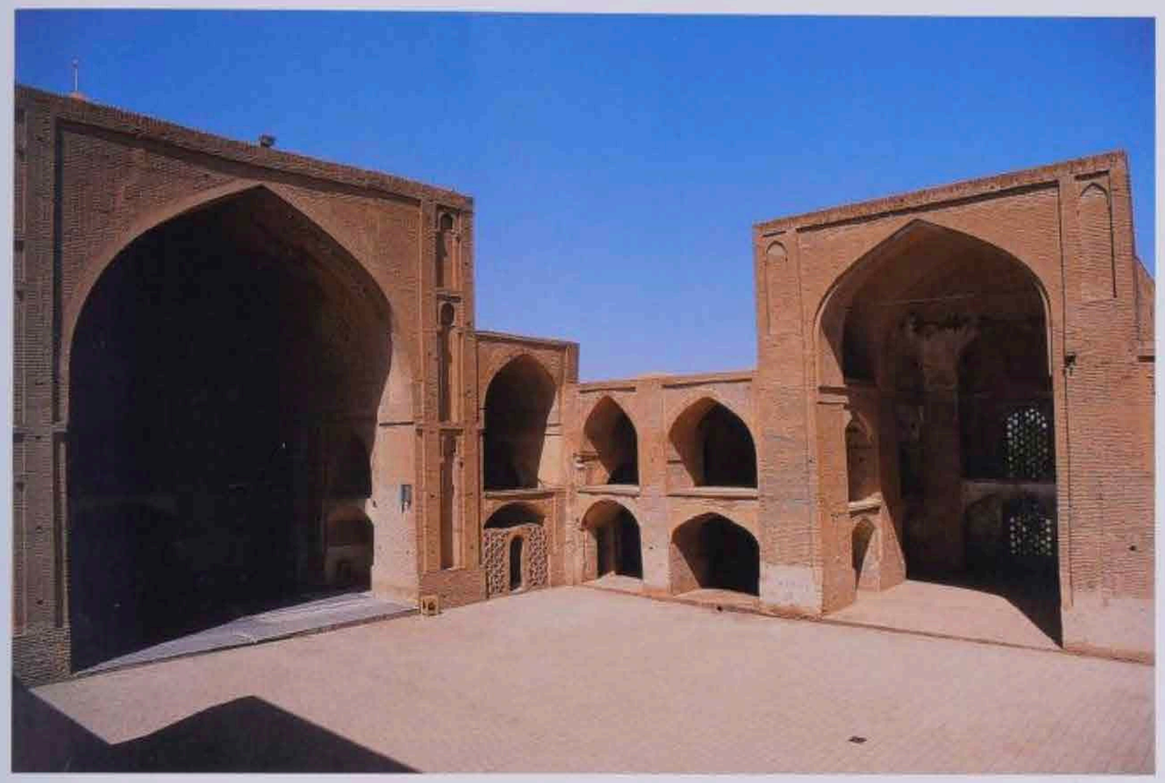
The next great culture to emerge in eleventh-century Asia (Tughril I rose to power in 1038) would arrive from central Asia, where, as we have seen, considerable advances had been made in architecture and the arts (Firdawsi had dedicated his *Shah-nama*, or "Book of Kings," to the Ghaznavid Sultan Mahmud, and such renowned figures as Avicenna and al-Bīrūnī were denizens of the court at Khorāsān). This group would forcefully extend its control over Iranian territory.

122. ABOVE, LEFT. The minaret of Mas'ud III in Ghazni, central Afghanistan

123. ABOVE, RIGHT. The mausoleum of Qabus ibn Wushmagir ibn Ziyar in Gonbad-i Qabus

Originally nomadic peoples of Turkish origin, evolving from structured clans, the new invaders showed tremendous political and military cohesion. Although we have no Turkish sources, the information from Arab or Persian historical accounts provides a partial, albeit perhaps not too objective, picture. We know that the tribe was organized along male lineage and that territories were governed by an *atabeg*. Theoretically a military chieftain and "tutor" to Seljuq princes, the *atabeg* often became an autonomous governor with an independent fiefdom, passing down his title along hereditary lines. In this way, dynasties were formed, such as the Zanghids, Ildegizids or Salghurids. The Seljuqs exercised an important political role, bringing about significant changes, including those in religious practice. The Būyids were Shiites, as were the Fatimids in Egypt (909–1171). However, the Seljuqs imprinted their own conservative Sunni stamp, showing little tolerance for any heretical forms of the faith. They quickly invaded the Iranian territories, taking Baghdad, the seat of the caliphate, in 1055. In 1071 the Seljuqs defeated the Byzantines farther to the west, at Manzikert (in the vicinity of Lake Van, in eastern Anatolia), opening up access to the Mediterranean. Extremely shrewd rulers, they were able to attract the greatest intellectuals of the time. A powerful monarch, Malik Shāh (r. 1072–92), adopted Arab, Persian, and Turkish regal titles, thus declaring himself the universal sovereign, aided by the expansion of his great empire. Even the selection of *viziers*, as in the aforementioned Nizam al-Mulk, was geared to maintaining a balanced political environment among Turkish and Islamic elements. However, it seems that his successors were not always so wise in their actions, if it is true that the twelve sons of Nizam al-Mulk demanded an almost religious form of veneration. The same political climate that helped Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1059–1111), a theologian, jurist, and philosopher, make the mystic doctrine of the Sufis acceptable to the more intransigent Sunnis, also provoked the Shiites to resistance. One Shiite group, the Nizari





124. OPPOSITE. Caravansary of Ribat-i Sharaf, Khorāsān, 1114–54

125. ABOVE. Central courtyard (*sahn*) and two *iwans*, west and north, at the Congregational Mosque (Masjid-i Jum'a), Ardistan

Ishmaelites, known as "Assassins," barricaded itself at Alamut, in the mountains not far from the Caspian. They resorted to methods we would now define as terrorist until they were finally overcome by the Mongols (1256). Another prominent figure—whose literary importance has been exaggerated among Western critics—was Omar Khayyam, a scientific scholar more than a poet, who was highly appreciated by the greatest Seljuq sultan, Malik Shāh.

The Seljuqs fortunately understood the importance of communications between the various provinces of their empire, and established an efficient system of trade routes with caravansaries, offering protection for people and goods during long periods of travel. In fact, despite the centralization of power, extended territories populated by nomadic Turkish groups remained absolutely indifferent to the official demands for stationary settlements. These groups also had a notorious propensity for raid skirmishes. Nevertheless, it remains clear that despite all these limitations (not the least of which were the exorbitant taxes levied on agricultural produce, one of the reasons that led to the Seljuq's demise), this period was extremely important for its cultural and artistic contributions, which left a considerable legacy of materials, especially when compared to the relative void of preceding centuries.

The caravansary of Ribat-i Sharaf[35] in eastern Khorāsān (plate 124), dating from 1114 (with a restoration in 1154), and located on one of the main caravan routes leading to Bukhara and Samarkand, is an impressively regal edifice. The fired-brick structure features a high wall, which gives the impression of a fortification. The building is distributed around two courtyards: the first, which is smaller, was probably used to house a reasonably well-manned garrison, while the second—organized around an axial scheme of four *iwans* facing a courtyard—also contained domed rooms that could be used for short stays by the sultan. The main portal is flanked by two buttresses in the form of *mihrabs* so that those arriving after the gates had been closed would still be able to use these structures for prayer.

From a decorative standpoint, the building is a triumph of ornamental motifs in brick, ter-

racotta, and stucco, all liberally used and displaying designs and techniques that can be considered an evolution in the stylistic continuity discussed thus far. The caravansary is a pivotal monument in the development of Persian architecture, which significantly employs the axial arrangement of four *iwans* set around a central courtyard.

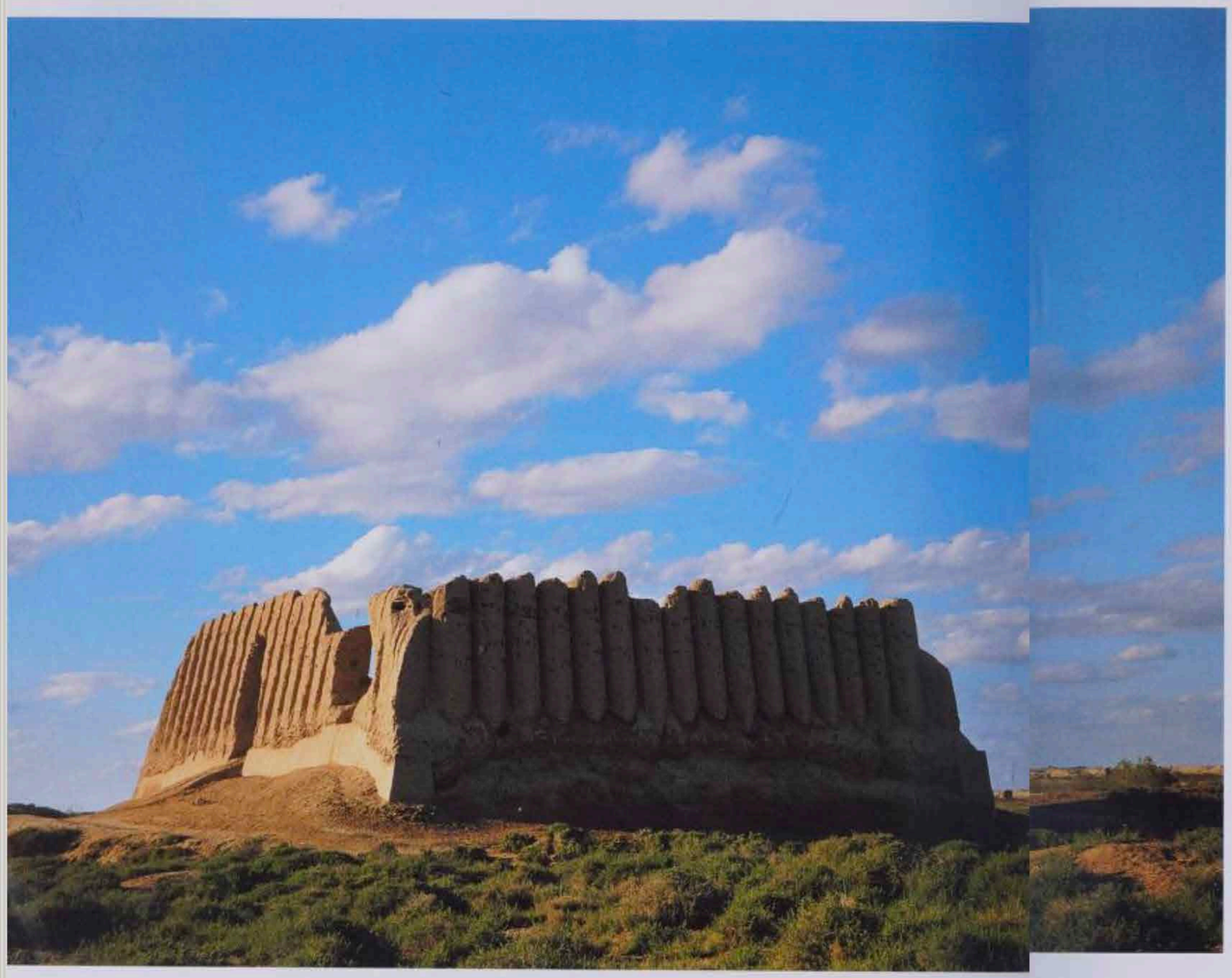
The fact that this spatial organization of the four *iwans* is applied in civil architecture, perhaps even before its appearance in religious structures, is further evidenced in the caravansary of Dayakhatun (eleventh to twelfth century),[36] located between Bukhara and Khiva. This structure, which is divided into four principal sections, also features an exterior brick wall with semicircular corner towers, typical of military architecture. This military style is also found in the severe and geometrically monumental Ribat-i Malik (1078),[37] located between Bukhara and Samarkand. All that remains of this structure is the impressive gateway, a product of restoration. At Dayakhatun, the four axial *iwans* are linked by a series of porticoes, while the living and storage areas open up along the perimeter walls. The main decorative elements are achieved through the arrangement of flat bricks.

The region surrounding Esfahān, including the previously described Nayin, as well as the Natanz, which will be discussed later in this chapter, features two fascinating congregational mosques, one at Zavareh (1135–1136)[38] and the other at Ardistan (plates 125–126),[39] probably a later construction. These two buildings may have served as models for the great Congregational Mosque of Esfahān. Zavareh is, however, the first four-*iwan* mosque to be built *ex novo* in Iran, and is thus the starting point for a long and magnificent tradition. The mosque is rectangular and somewhat elongated in structure, and the entrance is at the northeast corner; the *mihrab*, at the south end, is adorned with a large dome and anterior *iwan*. The date for this structure is provided by a Kufic inscription in brick and stucco in the courtyard. The three remaining *iwans* are smaller than the *qibla iwan* and are linked by a two-story arcade. On the western

126. ABOVE. Dome with stucco reliefs in the *mihrab*, Congregational Mosque, Ardistan

127. OPPOSITE. Mausoleum of Pir-i 'Alamdar at Damghan

128. OVERLEAF. The twin mausoleums of Kharraqan, 1067 and 1086. Magnificent examples of Seljuq funerary architecture, perhaps inspired by nomad tents, these structures show remarkable craftsmanship and ingenuity, particularly in the geometric interlaced effects achieved by the simple arrangement of bricks.



129. Remains of a palace in the city of Merv (present-day Turkmenistan)

exterior side of the mosque there is a massive cylindrical minaret, which contains traces of ceramic insets. It is not known whether these are original or the result of later restorations. The *mihrab* is adorned with stucco decorations, and three naves run along the sides of the domed prayer hall, parallel to the *qibla* wall. On the exterior, the simple yet majestic dome reveals the arrangement of the cubic foundation surmounted by an octagonal drum that supports the dome; the interior, however, is a play of niches and pendentives. The mosque at Ardistan is regrettably more a product of various reconstructions. Originally a "kiosk" mosque built on the foundations of a Sasanian fire temple, the structure is now comparable to descriptions of Zavareh. The mosque contains an imposing dome, especially in view of its location in what is even today little more than a large village, rising above a stucco *mihrab* dating from 1158. The anterior *iwan*, constructed two years later (1160), is covered by a barrel-vaulted ceiling with floral and palm stucco reliefs inspired by a plethora of fabric motifs. There is also an interesting painted

checkerboard decoration on the intrados of an arch, tentatively dated to the mid-ninth century (940?)[40] and clearly reminiscent of certain woven motifs, particularly those used in kilims.

An entire chapter could be devoted to mausoleums, which, following the example of Bukhara, became a favorite type of architectural structure, in Iran and elsewhere.[41] The mausoleum of Pir-i 'Alamdar at Damghan (plate 127),[42] with its cylindrical shape (and reconstructed dome), is structurally quite similar to a large minaret. The building also features impressive decorative interlacing in brick. An altogether different structure is found in Yazd, at the mausoleum of Davazdah Imam ("The Twelve Imams"), which dates from 1037.[43] The exterior is visually quite severe, with a massive square foundation. However, there is a constant, precise interplay between the solid volumes of the exterior and interior, where a series of blind lunettes are crowned by arches bearing stunning, original Kufic inscriptions. In Kharraqan (on the plain of Qonqorolong, near Qazvin) a pair of twin mausoleums (plate 128)[44] was recently "discovered"; dating from 1067 and 1086, respectively, these are Seljuq constructions. The design of the two structures is octagonal, with engaged columns at the corners, topped by a domed roof. As Hillenbrand has observed, "many details of the structure and the ornamentation evoke the *yurt*, or tent, of the Turkish nomads."[45] The ability to create complex geometric motifs with simple bricks is brilliantly realized here with a repertoire that, while hardly infinite, often seems so. In the tomb dating from 1086, there are no less than seventy distinct geometric designs. Even the small Seljuq cupolas gracing the Masjid-i Jum'a in Esfahān are, in number and variety, further evidence of how tremendous skill can transform simple fired brick into an instrument of such singular artistic refinement. It is no accident that this occurred in Iran, where the technique was cultivated over an extremely long period of time. It should be pointed out that the Seljuqs were also responsible for great building projects in Anatolia, where they reigned from 1077 to 1307. There, however, they favored the use of stone, due to a local Christian tradition (Byzantine with Armenian and Georgian variants) that persevered over many centuries. With regard to the mausoleums in Kharraqan, mention should be made of the wall paintings that adorn the interior. These are not merely inscriptions (which, of course, abound) but also representations of mosque lamps (bearing the inscription *baraka li-sahibihi*, "fortune to the owner"), pomegranate trees with birds, and medallions with peacocks, necks entwined, all symbolically alluding to paradise, which was quite suitable to the sepulchral functions of these buildings.[46]

Malik Shāh was the last great Seljuq sovereign to rule within Persian territory, where Esfahān had been established as the capital. His successor, Mu'izz al-Din Sanjar, after governing in Iraq, Fārs, and Khuzistan, left these provinces to his grandsons and moved the capital to Merv, a major crossroads for the caravan routes of Khorāsān in present-day Turkmenistan (plate 129). The city, located in an oasis not far from the Murghab River, was enormous, and its ruins[47] are still impressive, particularly the mausoleum of Sanjar (1157), which predominates, even from a distance. Merv was destroyed by the Mongols, and only the massive looming structure of the mausoleum has been saved from oblivion, although the vicissitudes of time, and several inappropriate restorations, have left their heavy toll. This notable monument, built from fired brick, has a square foundation and mighty walls; the Bukharian concept of an exterior gallery is revived and developed in such a way that the severe mass becomes lightened above, providing a balanced transition to the great dome, which was originally finished in glazed brick. The dome is visible from miles away. The gallery arches are embellished with fragments of decora-

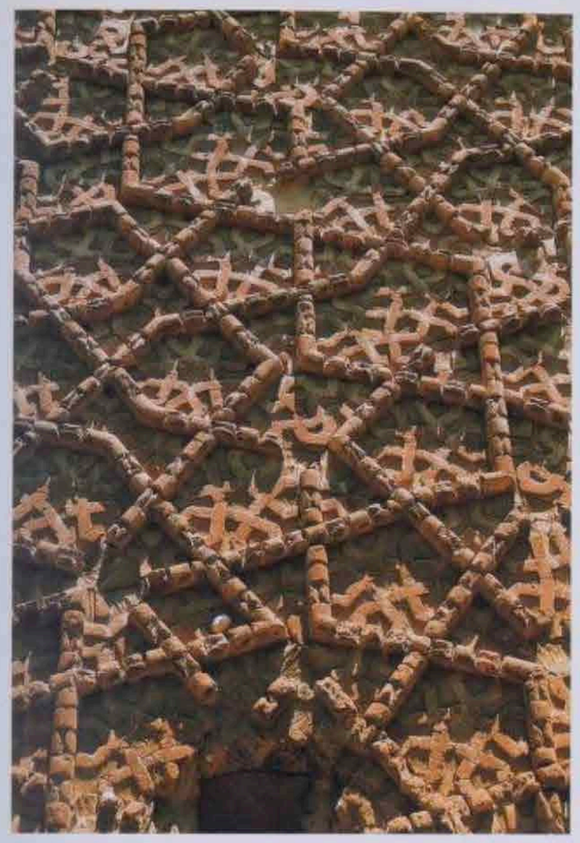
tive stuccowork,[48] a reference to the oblique style of the Samarran Abbasids also found in the stucco motifs in the piers supporting the dome of Nizam al-Mulk in Esfahān.

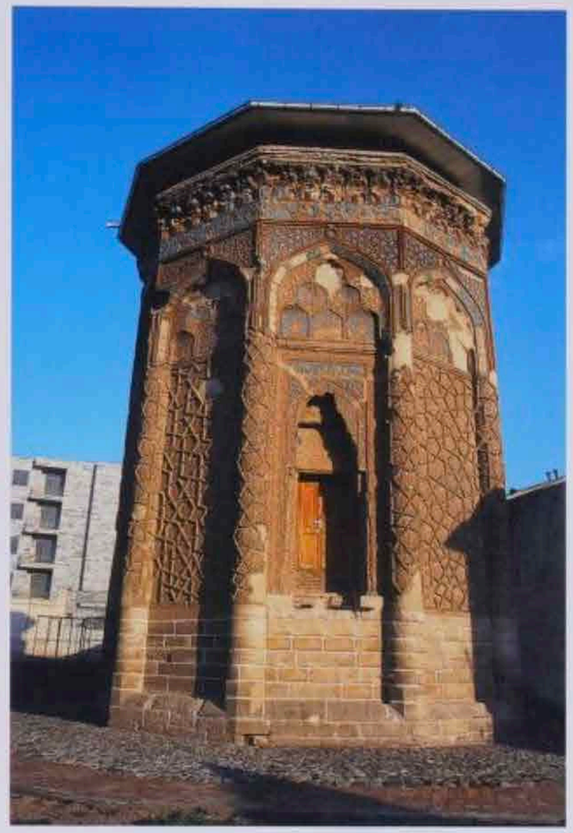
Another splendidly majestic mausoleum is Mumina Khatun in Nakhchivan (Azerbaijan), which dates from 1186.[49] Here a decorative series of glazed ceramic pieces is inset into the fired brick wall. Seljuq achievements in the arts included the creation of highly refined ceramics, which found numerous applications in both architecture and earthenware. The *mihrab*, coated with a metallic glaze at one point reused at the Masjid-i Meidan in Kāshān, was the work of Al-Hasan ibn al-Arabshah (1226). Inscribed with the names of the twelve Shiite Imams, it is now in Berlin.[50] In terms of earthenware, the most notable technique employed was *mina'i* or *haft rang* (seven colors). Unfortunately this opulent and refined period, known for its exceptional figurative work,[51] was brief in duration.

THE MONGOL PERIOD: THE IL-KHANIDS

The internal weaknesses of the Seljuq reign and unresolved conflicts between nomadic impulses and permanent settlements continued to undermine political cohesion. This situation was further aggravated by exorbitant property taxes, widespread corruption, and arrogance among the ruling classes, all of which left the Seljuqs ill prepared to confront an ever-growing external threat. By the early thirteenth century, the newly emboldened Mongols, who in Asia had massed around the extraordinary figure of Genghis Khan (1167–1227), began to clash with Islamic forces along the frontier in central Asia. Otrar fell in 1219, and, one year later, Samarkand and Bukhara were besieged, followed by Balkh in 1221. The conquest of Iranian territory was delegated to Hulegu Khan (b. 1217, r. 1256–65) and began with the siege of Alamut and the defeat of the Assassins (the formal beginning of his rule); he entered Baghdad in 1258 (when al-Musta'sim, the last caliph, although in name only, died), and then went on to Aleppo and Damascus (1260); his army was finally defeated by the Mamluks in Egypt.

The destruction was monumental, with massacres (in places such as Merv and Rayy, then a flourishing center for the arts, particularly textiles and ceramics, traditions that would never be revived) that are remembered as some of the most ferocious in the history of mankind. Then came the *pax mongolica*, with its unprecedented ease of contact between west and east, but for more than eighty years, the territory of Iran would be utterly devastated. Construction obviously ground to a halt, although this was clearly not due to lost technologies, since the techniques used for creating fired brick were deeply rooted throughout the Middle East at the time. The Mongol occupation—with its extraordinary Seljuq prelude—was, in fact, an extremely productive period. The new sovereigns were complete strangers to Islamic culture and brought with them their own syncretic amalgam of shamanistic beliefs fused with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Nestorian Christianity. The noblewomen, in particular, tended to be devout Christians, illustrated by the example of the wife of Abaqa Khan, Maria Palaeologina, daughter of Michael VII Palaeologus and sister of Andronicus II (r. 1282–28). After her consort's death, in 1281, she returned to Constantinople, founding the Church of Panagia Mouchliotissa (Our Lady of the Mongols). She later entered this religious order, helping to commission one of the stupendous mosaics adorning the Byzantine basilica of Saint Savior in Chora. People of Jewish faith or origin, such as the enlightened vizier Rashid al-Din, also played key roles. The artistic repertoire underwent radical change with the introduction of elements typical of the Far East: dragons, phoenixes, lotuses and peonies[52] were quickly assimilated and soon became essential



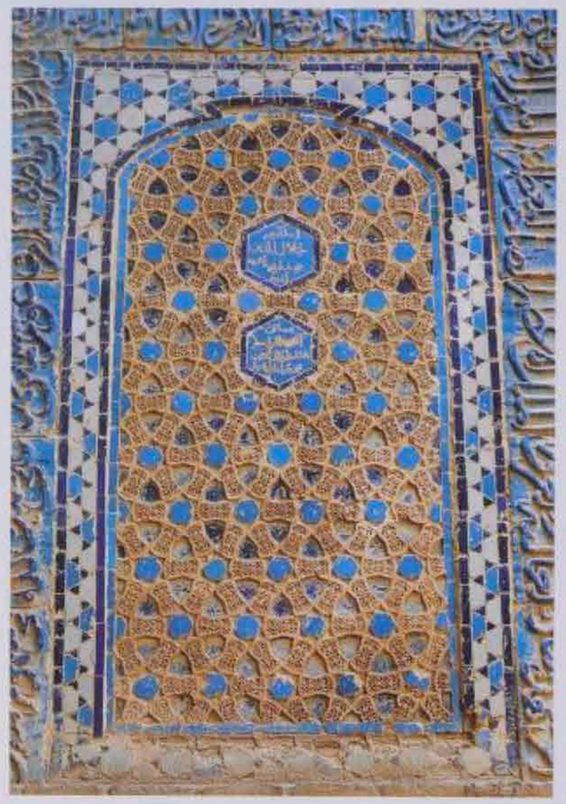


130–131. The mausoleum of Gonbad-i Kabud (Azerbaijan): detail of decorative brickwork (ABOVE, LEFT) and view of overall structure (ABOVE, RIGHT)

fixtures not only in Persian art, but throughout the Islamic world. This can be seen in Syrian-Egyptian Mamluk decoration. East Asian ornamental motifs were already being employed in the lavish palace that Abaqa Khan (r. 1265–81) constructed at Takht-i Sulayman, a site of tremendous scenic and historical significance. The spot was already revered by the Achaemenids, who maintained one of their three sacred fires here (Khosrow II also had the "True Cross" brought here from Jerusalem). The most striking physical feature at Takht-i Sulayman is the cone of an extinct volcano. At its center lies a perennial blue lake of undetermined depth, ringed by Sasanian walls still perfectly preserved in many spots. The Mongol sovereign had his palace built here, on the ruins of a Sasanian citadel.[53]

One of the most significant changes during the Mongol period was the increasing use of decorative inserts made of glazed ceramic, most notably of astonishingly brilliant turquoise, as seen in the city of Marāgheh. The oldest mausoleum (Gonbad-i Sorkh, 1147)[54] was designed following the classic square floor plan and decorated with interlaced brick motifs. This was not unusual, since the same type of structure existed at Kharraqan, even though the main portal here is adorned with ceramic inserts. Gonbad-i Kabud (plates 130–31, 1196),[55] with its octagonal shape and its engaged columns, is a minor masterpiece of its kind. The entire surface of this building features a decorative network of red fired brick. Here, however, the ceiling arches with barely visible *muqarnas* are heavily embellished with ceramics, a decorative approach that seems to approach culmination at Gonbad-i Ghaffariyah (during the period of Abu Said Bahadur Khan, r. 1316–35).[56]

It would be impossible not to mention one of Marāgheh's most outstanding monuments: the observatory used by the great astronomer and philosopher Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201–1274). It is amusing to note that this renowned figure was also a sheer opportunist who followed

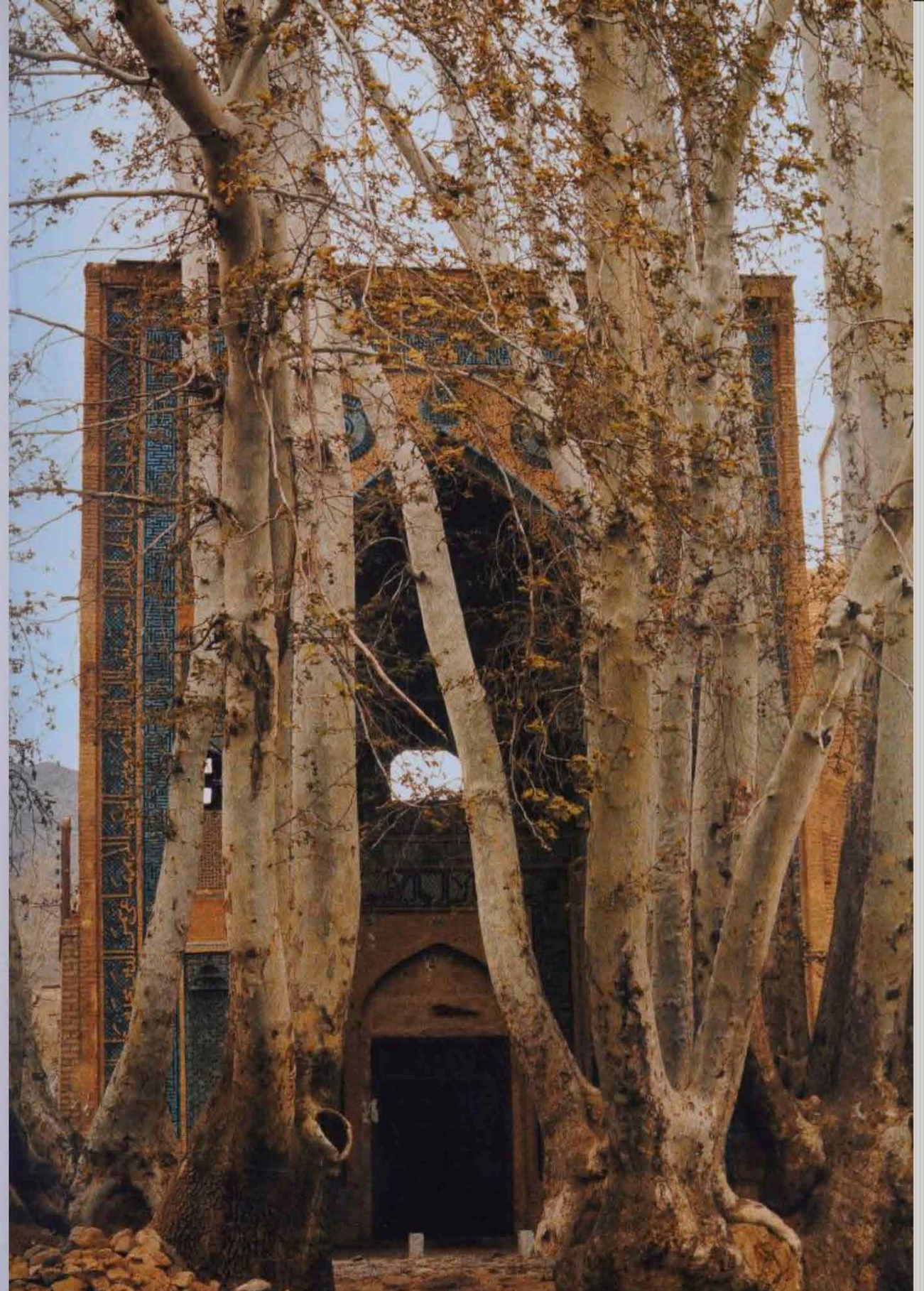


132–133. ABOVE. Two details of the decorative work of the Congregational Mosque (Masjid-i Jum'a), Natanz

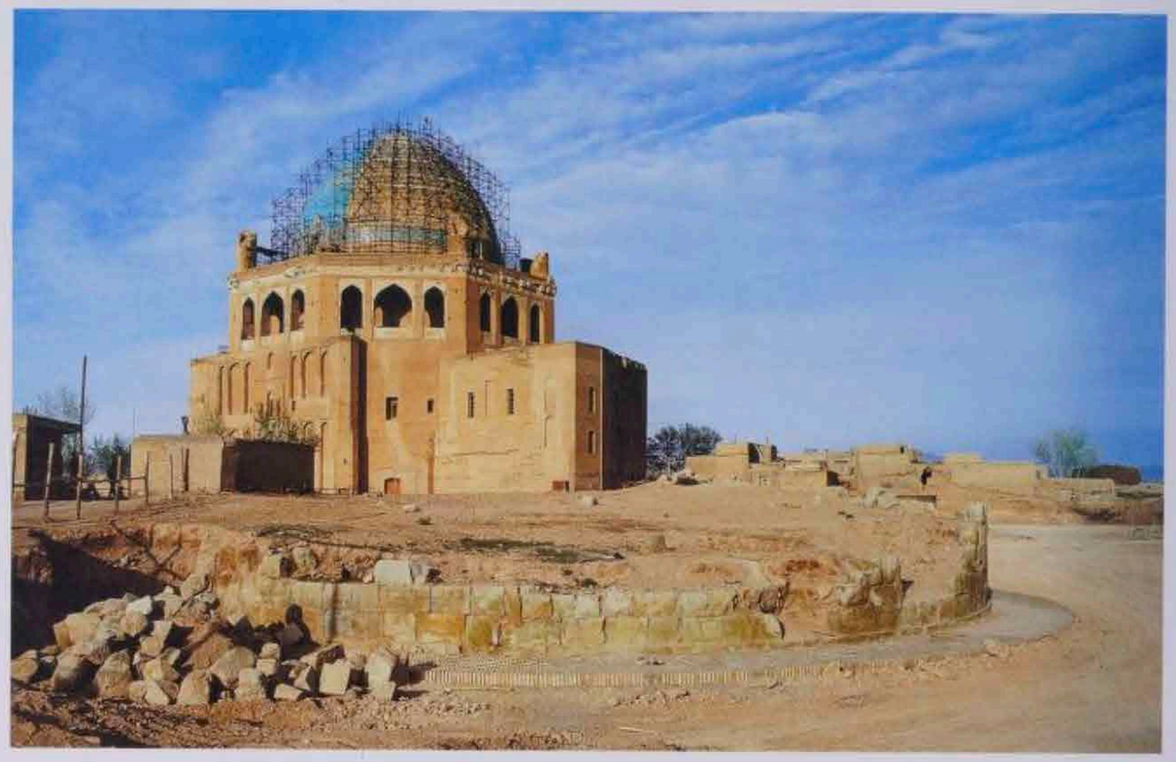
the faith of his convenience, be it Sunni or Shiite. The observatory was equipped with at least ten high-precision scientific instruments.[57] The hillside on which this structure is located is studded with interesting grottoes, which may have been used either to house scientists or as a Nestorian monastery.

The Il-Khanid Arghun (1284–91) was one of the period's more noteworthy figures. While never converting to Islam, he practiced a form of religious syncretism based on Buddhism. Arghun made powerful inroads into the region of Qonqorolong ("plain of the tawny horses"), an excellent grazing area that must have reminded the Mongols of the steppes of central Asia, where the residence of Sultaniyya[58] was established. The surrounding territory became heavily settled by the Mongols,[59] and by the era of Abaqa Khan, this was the site of Viar. An imposing (and almost Chinese) stone dragon[60] attests to the presence of the sole Buddhist "monastery," which was later Islamicized with the insertion of an incongruous and never completed *mihrab*, interestingly aligned in the wrong direction. Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304) converted to Islam and was notorious for his intolerance, even if he allowed the completion of Giovanni Battista's cathedral in Marāgheh and eventually married his father's widow, a practice that might have been common among Altaic Turkish tribes, but certainly existed in stark contrast with Koranic doctrine. Ghazan established his capital at Tabrīz and became a great champion of the arts. Under his vizier, Rashid al-Din, the city was transformed into a dynamic international center, where Ghazan created his own quarter eponymously named Rashidiyya, dying shortly thereafter.[61]

The Congregational Mosque at Natanz (plates 132–34, 1307)[62] rises near a *khanqah*, a traditional religious site, in this case organized around the tomb of a highly venerated figure, which also served as a lodging for pilgrims, generally Sufi mystics. The mosque follows the traditional four-*iwan* design. An earthquake caused portions of the plaster and mortar in the domed prayer



134. OPPOSITE. Old plane tree trunks rise from the gargantuan stump of an ancient tree in front of the *iwan* leading to the massive Natanz complex, 1307. Throughout Iran, centuries-old trees are often found near the tombs of highly venerated religious figures.



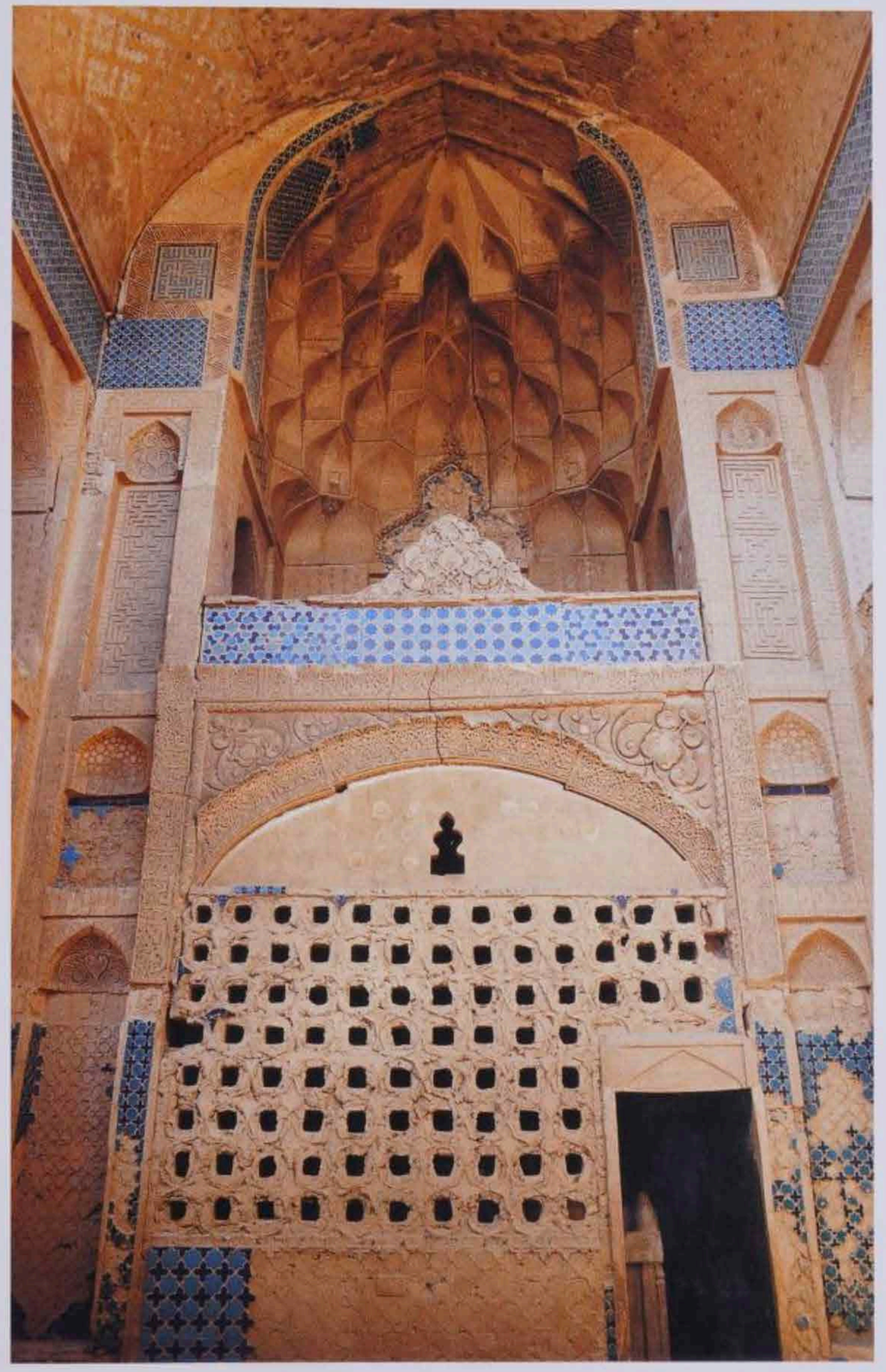
hall to fall, revealing fragments of a Kufic inscription composed of skillfully arranged bricks, undoubtedly Seljuq in origin.

Beautiful Mongol Koranic inscriptions adorn the intrados of the *iwan* arches. The gate leading to the *khanqah* is decorated with blue, white, black, and turquoise glazed bricks, interspersed with unglazed terracotta, a work of great originality (plates 132–33). Aside from the inscriptions, which include a particularly elegant square Kufic inscription probably inspired by Chinese seals, there are a series of harmoniously executed intertwined polygonal motifs. By this time, polychrome (although predominantly turquoise) surface decoration was well established, and apparently the techniques tried out at Natanz were later used on one of the most noteworthy buildings in Islam, the mausoleum of Sultaniyya,[63] constructed by Oljeitu (r. 1304–16) and dating from 1313–14 (plate 135). Oljeitu was a remarkable figure: "Originally a Sunni who had then followed Christianity and Buddhism, he reconverted to Sunnism (after being a Shiite sometime around 1310) prior to his death."[64] Oljeitu probably built this impressive monument, with its massive dome rising 175 feet (53 m) high, during his Shiite phase, with the intention of bringing the bodies of Ali and Hussein, the first Shiite martyrs, here to what would be the foundations of a new imperial capital.

Recent archaeological finds indicate that the mausoleum was built on a high platform, a common tradition in the Islamic architecture of Mughal India, but one that is rarely found in Iran. A containment wall with semicircular towers remains. The design is unique, featuring a regular, square foundation with smoothed corners on three sides, while the fourth side is composed of two adjoining sections that create a rectangular space. As in Merv, an octagonal exterior porticoed gallery rises above the massive foundation walls. Above the gallery a series of eight small turrets or minarets literally crown the main ovoid dome, which was once adorned with glazed turquoise tiles. In contrast, the white interior contains rather simple inscriptions.[65] For a long time it was thought that this was a later alteration; however, it is evident from the content and style of the writing that this was a stylistic afterthought, most likely

135. ABOVE. The mausoleum of Oljeitu at Sultaniyya, 1313–14. The structure was built atop a broad platform with semi-cylindrical buttresses. This practice was widespread in the Islamic mausoleums of Mughal India (sixteenth century). Apparently this is one of very few such architectural examples in Iran.

136. OPPOSITE. The monument to Pir-i Bakran in Linjan, interior, 1303–1312.



executed sometime around 1315. The primitive decoration, which has been partially recovered after many years of restoration efforts using local technicians under the direction of an Italian team led by Piero Sanpaolesi, is exceptionally rich and sumptuous, with interlacing motifs in unglazed terracotta interspersed with glazed bricks. The walls and vaulting of the galleries also contain dazzling stucco reliefs and paintings, as well stylized inscriptions, stamped into the mortar between two sets of bricks. This simple yet highly effective technique was already used during the Seljuq period, as seen in the elegant wall decoration gracing the eastern *iwan* of the Masjid-i Jum'a in Esfahān. The Oljeitu mausoleum is an imposing monument that spawned its own stylistic tradition: "Whether or not the metaphor of the crown [the eight minarets] was intended literally, the idea was enthusiastically plagiarized in later buildings as varied as Ottoman mosques, and even the Taj Mahal."[66]

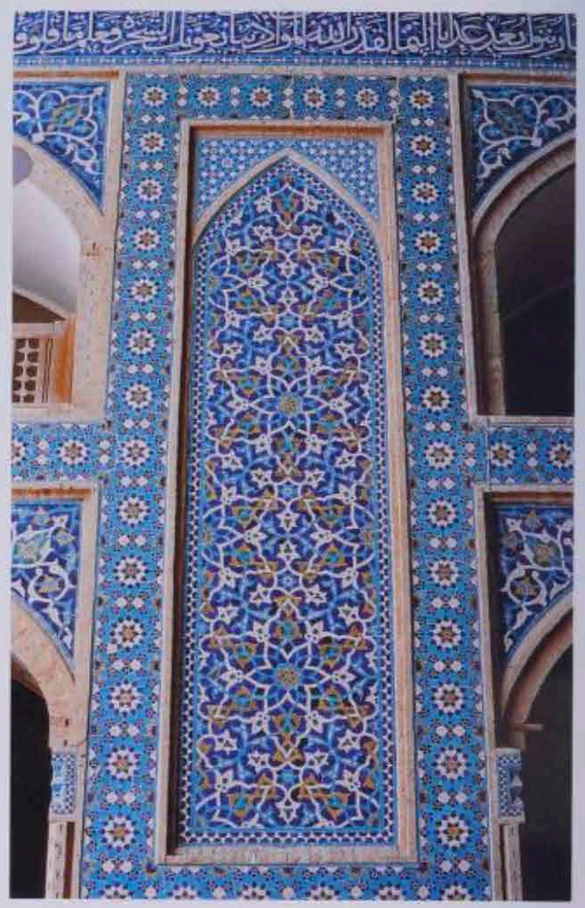
Linjan, a small rural community some twenty miles (30 km) southwest of Esfahān, is the site of another unique monument, dedicated to Pir-i Bakran (in the absence of reliable details, generally described as a Sufi). This structure has been dated to various phases from 1299 to 1312.[67] The monument seems to have been somewhat inorganically conceived, although dating from the same period as Oljeitu, from a series of superimpositions and juxtapositions without any organizing scheme. Here, a main square chamber containing two tombs leads to an entryway featuring a vaulted hall with an interesting painting.[68] The structure also has a notable large *iwan* and a *dalan* (access corridor). While the religious focal point is clearly the tomb, the most striking architectural feature remains the reconstructed *iwan*, which is accessed through a side passageway (plate 136). The *iwan*'s open side has been closed in by a wall, creating a magnificent stucco *mihrab* (plates 137–38),[69] a unique if somewhat puzzling touch. The distinctive complex is nevertheless graced by rather undistinguished decorative ornamentation, which appears not only in the stuccowork (where an unusual sampling of work indicates an artist attempting to show his great versatility, not yet settling into one particular style), but also in the ceramic facings. The hypothesis is that this was a Muslim sanctuary—uncommonly beautiful—which was invented to counterbalance, or at least reconfigure, the area's great significance as a Jewish pilgrimage site, which brought people came from Iran and beyond to pay homage to what may have been the tomb of the biblical Esther. The province of Esfahān—which, as in Sultaniyya, claimed a massive Mongol presence—is also the site of the mosque of Ashtarjan.[70] This structure contains two minarets flanking a *pishtaq* (monumental entry portal), a feature also seen at the mausoleum of Amu Abdullah in Esfahān. In Tabrīz, the most impressive monument is the mosque of Ali Shah (c. 1315),[71] with its gargantuan fired-brick wall that must have rivaled the famed *iwan* at Ctesiphon. A contrasting sense of balance is achieved at the mosque of Varamin (1332 and 1336),[72] a fired-brick structure organized along the axial four-*iwan* design. Here the *qibla* wall stands in front of the main domed *mihrab*, which is heavily embellished with "baroquesque" stucco floral reliefs.

137–138. Mihrab at Pir-i Bakran (BELOW); detail of decorative stuccowork (ABOVE)

139. Detail of vault *muqarnas*, entrance to the Congregational Mosque (Masjid-i Jum'a), Yazd

The premature death of Rashid al-Din (1318) must have sounded an alarm for the ruling Il-Khanids. Their last sovereign was Abu Sa'id (r. 1316–35), after whom the empire splintered into various powerful states, the most significant being that of the Muzaffarids, lords of the southern provinces of Kermān and Fārs, near the borders of present-day Iraq.

The Friday mosque at Kermān, which dates from 1349,[73] was subjected to various subsequent restorations. The design is extremely simple, with a central courtyard and four axial *iwans*. The *qibla iwan* is significantly larger than the other three structures and does not introduce a vaulted prayer hall, or any such structure. The use of this *iwan* as a prayer hall is hardly new (the same scheme occurs at Niriz); however, the monumentality of the building adds unique emphasis. Scholars unanimously agree that during the second half of the fourteenth century a technique began to emerge involving the use of ceramic as a highly refined architectural surfacing material. True ceramic mosaic began to appear, replacing the simpler forms of partially glazed brick. With this technique,[74] facades would acquire a completely new sense of prominence and mate-



140–142. ABOVE AND OPPOSITE. Details of three decorative ceramic mosaic panels, Congregational Mosque, Yazd, c. 1375

riality. This architectural revolution would come to full fruition during the subsequent Timurid and Safavid periods.

The degree of technical perfection achieved in only a few years by Persian ceramic artists is simply astounding, as exemplified by the Congregational Mosque of Yazd. The design of this mosque (c. 1375,[75] but with significant later changes) is in itself quite eccentric, beginning with the entryway and its lofty *pishtaq*, with an arched doorway below, a ceiling covered in *muqarnas* (plate 139), and a window that breaks through the space, creating a play of light, similar to that at Natanz, but far more soaring. There are also two minarets covered in ceramic mosaic niches, making the structure itself seem to dematerialize, only two centuries after the use of simple brick adornment. A spacious courtyard is surrounded by porticoes, judiciously left white, thus balancing the impact of the great *iwan* (the only one in this complex), which precedes the main domed hall with the *mihrab*. On the sides of this central domed structure are two large rectangular spaces, which thus recall the Sasanian concept of the triple *iwan*, quite popular in the palaces of the time. As for decorative elements, despite the profusion of glazed brick and ceramic mosaic panels (plates 140–42), there is an overall sobriety in the interior spaces, particularly the *mihrab*, which transmits a sense of intense spirituality.

The mausoleum of Tughtabeg Khatun at Kunya Urgench (c. 1370)[76] is nearly contemporaneous with the mosque of Yazd. Octagonal in shape (except for the rear section containing the entrance and burial chamber), it is noted for the large *pishtaq* (without minarets) attached to one side of the mausoleum, forming a vestibule or hall. The exterior walls are interspersed with open spaces fitted with windows and a network of deep niche-like recesses (almost forming

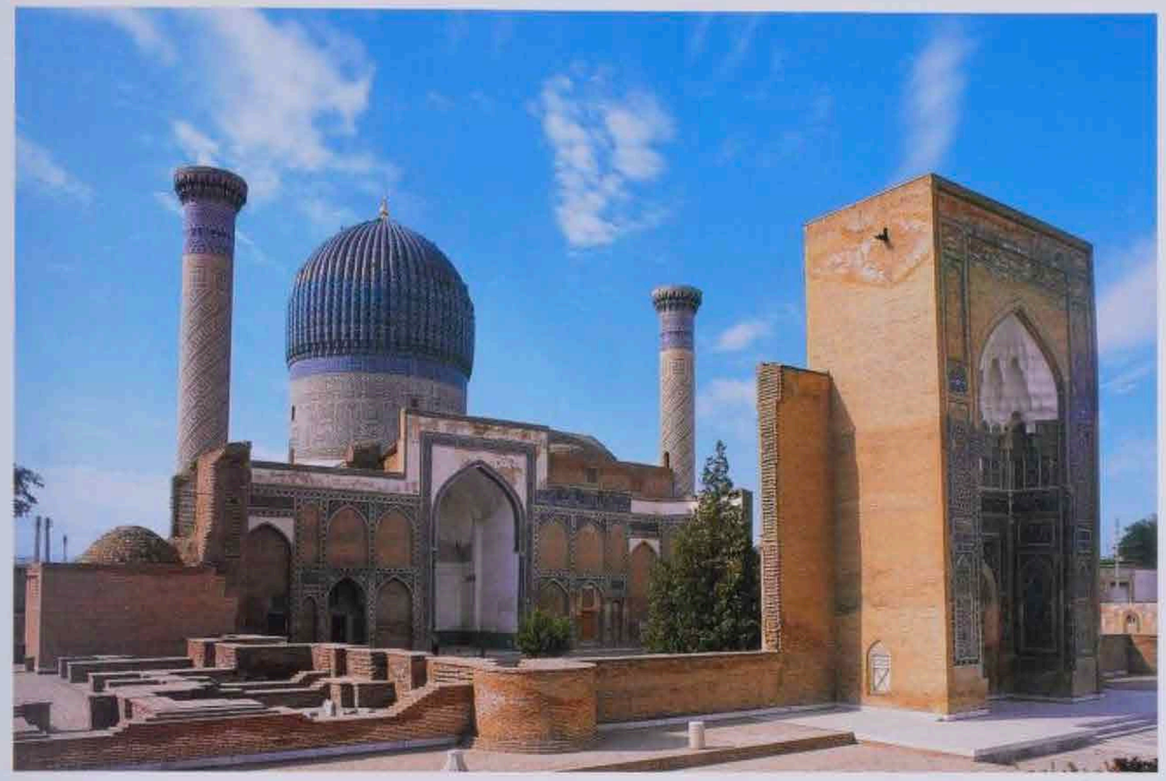
small *iwans* or *pishtaqs*), which add a subtle sense of movement. This type of architectural intervention prefigures some popular designs found in Timurid and Safavid palaces, as well as works in India, where such structures were generally on a much larger scale. The interior and exterior decoration (the latter mostly in ruins) contains such refined ceramic surfacing that it was considered among the most magnificent of its time, along with the mosque at Yazd.

THE TIMURIDS

Another invasion from the east marked the onset of Timurid rule. The figure of Timur-i Lang ("Timur the Lame," immortalized in Europe as Tamerlane) and the complicated fortunes of his dynasty will be dealt with in the later chapter on miniatures. While here and there, a tendency toward the monumental can be found (at the mosques of Tabrīz and Sultaniyya), under the Timurids, it became a dominant theme.[77]

One of the most interesting monuments built by Timur is the mausoleum of Ahmad Yasavi at Turkestan (1399),[78] which offers insight into the political and ideological mindset of this great leader and sovereign. Ahmad Yasavi, a twelfth-century mystic who died in 1166, was the founder of an eponymous brotherhood. A popular belief holds that it was Yasavi who converted the Turks to Islam. Islam's penetration into this extremely vast plateau was not a simple undertaking, as there were numerous free-form religious sects that centered on the figure of the shaman, the extremely popular and charismatic "priest" that presided over ancient rituals. The celebration of Ahmad Yasavi through the construction of this colossal edifice (the sanctuary's access *iwan* is thought to have extended some 164 feet [50 m] in length, while the main dome is 60 feet [18.2 m] in diameter and 123 feet [37.5 m] high) served the dual purpose of presenting him as an heir and paladin of a highly populist form of Islam and at the same time establishing a solid and relatively close sanctuary that could act as a surrogate for Mecca and Medina. If these two cities remained the principal holy sites for Islam, with Jerusalem the second and Hebron the third (for its "tomb of Abraham" and other prophets), then the fourth place could be split between Kairuan in Tunisia, Ayyub (Turkicized as Eyup) in Constantinople, Karbala and Najaf for the Shiites (and possibly Qom and Mashhad in Iran), and finally, the Tekke of Umm Haram in Cyprus, near what is presently the Larnaca airport.[79] Obviously a similar holy place had to be established in central Asia, and it was Timur that shrewdly filled this void. The mausoleum's splendors include an interesting use of glazed brickwork on the building's exterior to form epigraphs, as well as green jasper gravestones, magnificent carved doors with bronze knockers, and an enormous bronze *kazan* (cauldron) dating from 1399,[80] created by a master bronzesmith from Tabrīz, which measures eight feet (2.45 m) in diameter and five feet (1.58 m) high.

The same monumental scale is replicated in the mosque of Bibi Khanum[81] (1399–1404), which, measuring 581 by 358 feet (177 × 109 m) along its sides, with a central courtyard extending 285 by 207 feet (87 × 63 m), is one of the largest in the world. The structure follows the Iranian scheme, with four axial *iwans* and the anterior *qibla iwan* preceding the main domed hall with the *mihrab*. The lack of care in construction—caused by Timur's own hastiness to have the project completed—had disastrous consequences, especially given the seismic activity of the area. As a result, this enormous structure was abandoned over time. Although the mosque still makes a tremendous impression, this cannot compare to the awe it must have inspired in the beginning of the fifteenth century. The site is currently undergoing work, which should



143. ABOVE. Gur-i Mir, Timur funerary complex, Samarkand (Uzbekistan)

144. OVERLEAF. Necropolis of Shah-i Zinda, Samarkand

be classified as reconstruction more so than renovation, given the extensive use of reinforced concrete.

Timur established Samarkand as the capital of his empire, which he had rebuilt[82] using skilled craftsmen, architects, designers, and artists. He imported these people from cities he had conquered and destroyed, so they would be unable to help in the reconstruction of their own homelands. The beautiful, contemporaneous account of Ruy González de Clavijo, ambassador of the king of Castile,[83] reveals that Timur's plan for the city also included vast spaces reserved for parks, gardens, and orchards.[84] Timur died at Otrar in 1404, after a long bout of pneumonia, while en route to one of his more extraordinary undertakings—the conquest of China. He was buried at Gur-i Mir,[85] a funerary complex he had originally built as a residence for the mortal remains of his grandson Sultan Muhammad, who had been wounded in the battle of Ankara in 1402. Gur-i Mir (plate 143) comprises a series of structures, which in addition to a mausoleum, includes a *madrasah* and a *khanqah*, as well as other functional areas. The actual mausoleum (preceded by a great *pishtaq* without minarets) is dominated by a fluted melon dome set on an elongated drum that is adorned with geometric Kufic inscriptions. The entire structure is covered in polychrome tiles. The lofty drum and ribbed dome are characteristic features of Timurid architecture, and they required the construction of a double-shell roof, one exterior, the other interior. This technique was not entirely new, since examples have been found in Mongol-period structures, notably at Sultaniyya.[86] The interior of this building is small and intimate, yet covered in sumptuous *muqarnas*. Lavish materials are used abundantly on the dome walls, including gold and marble, as well as tiles in a broad palette of brilliant colors, all starkly contrasting with the dark green, almost black nephrite used on the massive lid of Timur's sarcophagus.[87]

The many noteworthy monuments commissioned by Tamerlane include a majestically imposing palace, now in ruins, built at Shahr-i Sabz (the monarch had been born in a nearby

village) in 1379–96, now referred to as Ak Saray.[88] Remains of this colossal complex, which once soared above the landscape, are still visible. The original structure must have been over 164 feet (50 m) high and 66 feet (20 m) wide. The decorative technique used is *banna'i* (surfacing that combines glazed and unglazed tiles), which incorporates inscriptions, as well as geometric and floral patterns in turquoise, green, blue, white, black, and yellow, as finely detailed as lace. It is likely that master calligraphers were also brought in to work on this project.

The predilection for architecture on a grand scale is also seen at the famed necropolis of Shah-i Zinda (plate 144).[89] The complex was built in the late fourteenth century, except for the earlier tomb of Qusama ibn 'Abbas, which evolved into a holy site. Here, a series of mausoleums flanking the sides of a road are entered through a grand staircase—an unusual feature in Islamic architecture outside India—and include a *pishtaq* constructed by Ulugh Beg (the nephew of Tamerlane, who also served as governor of Samarkand) in 1434–35. Possibly the most beautiful necropolis in the world, Shah-i Zinda contains over twenty tombs, almost all built on square foundations and capped by either smooth or ribbed domes supported by elongated drums, stunningly finished in glazed ceramic. The three mausoleums that conclude the complex—Tumar Agha (1405), Khoja Ahmed (1360–61), and an unknown tomb (plates 145–146)—are so richly embellished with inscriptions and geometric decoration that they are staggering in their inventiveness, range of color dominated by a breathtaking turquoise, and refinement in contrasts. The site is truly a masterpiece.

Ulugh Beg also worked on the urban design of Samarkand, constructing a piazza or arena,[90] the Rigistan, flanked by a *madrasah* (1417–20) and a *khanqah*, with a caravansary to the north. Of these original structures, only the *madrasah* survives. The other buildings were replaced by the Shir Dar *Madrasah* (1646–47) and the Tala Kari *Madrasah* (1659–60), works commissioned by the Uzbek governor Bahadur Khan. The original *madrasah* follows the traditional four-*iwan* plan, with rooms provided on two floors, useful for some hundred or so students and teachers. The building was also used for instruction in the sciences. The exterior is dominated by an enormous *pishtaq*, practically an *iwan* itself (a barrel-vaulted structure lacking *muqarnas*), but without the minarets that are sometimes placed at the corners of such structures. The *pishtaq* is decorated with a marble base and fine ceramic mosaic panels, particularly on the walls flanking the entryway. These features are repeated in the other two later *madrasahs*, which, however, are far more garish. Ulugh Beg also commissioned the construction of a large astronomical observatory on a hill outside the city, proof that aside from governing, he was also devoted to his own studies.[91]

The Timurids shifted the political axis toward the east, so from an architectural standpoint, cities located in this part of the empire reaped the greatest benefits. The most conspicuous activity of this kind was found in Khorāsān and in such cities as Mashhad and Herāt, the latter of which was chosen by Shahrukh to serve as the capital. Timurid interventions in Mashhad include the great mosque of Gawhar Shad (1419),[92] a four-*iwan* complex, with the southern *iwan* supporting a dome. Here, minarets are no longer employed along the parapet of the *iwan*, but are used to flank the base, a characteristic feature of Indian architecture which Timur appropriated after his Delhi campaign of 1398. The style was first used at the mosque of Bibi Khanum. Gawhar Shad is perfectly balanced in all its elements. The ceramic facade treatments, comparable to those at Samarkand, are luminous, particularly in the use of brilliant turquoise. The building, as it appears today, is essentially Timurid, with its massive scale and arrangement of space according to function, including the *madrasah* and *khanqah*. Parts of this complex were

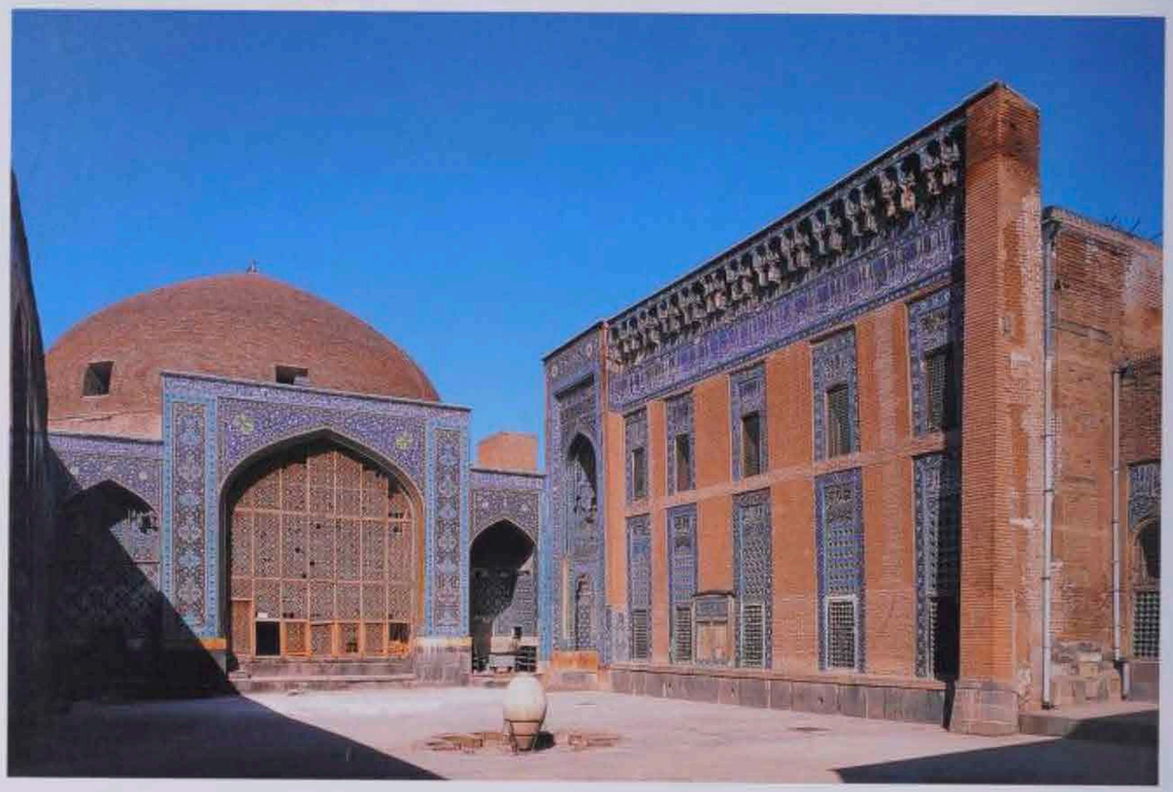
145–146. ABOVE AND OPPOSITE. The Timurid period was marked by extraordinary advances in artistic quality, as seen in the glazed ceramic wall decorations at the mausoleum of Kutlug Agha, necropolis of Shah-i Zinda, Samarkand.

built by Oljeitu, Shah Tahmasp, Shah 'Abbas, as well as Nadir Shah and Fath 'Ali Shah, aside from, of course, Shahrukh and his wife, Gawhar Shad.

During this period, the city of Herāt flourished tremendously not only in the art of miniature, but also in architecture. A stunning example is the *madrasah* and mausoleum of Gawhar Shad (1437),[93] which is structured on a four-*iwan* plan. The mausoleum, completed in 1432 and dominated by a triple-shell dome at the western corner, was built for the mortal remains of Baysunghur, a patron of the arts. The interior of the dome, which rises thirty-three feet (10 m), displays an interesting use of transverse arches, which correspond to the sixteen sides of the supporting drum. The magnificence of these arches is accentuated by an impressive use of blue, red, gold, and white ceramic finishes, clearly one of the triumphs of Timurid decorative art. Ghuzar Gah,[94] completed in 1425, is the sanctuary dedicated to the Sufi 'Abdallah Ansari (who died in 1089). The building was commissioned by Gawhar Shad, using Qivam al-Din, the same Shirazian architect who designed the *madrasah* in nearby Herāt; it has undergone at least three major restorations. The unusual floor plan combines a large courtyard of the four-*iwan* type with another larger *iwan* (without a dome), across from the main entrance. Areas accessible to pilgrims were located between the entrance and the two transversal *iwans*. The entry is dominated by an imposing *pishtaq* flanked by minarets and very spacious side rooms. The magnificent stucco decoration is sumptuously painted and adorned with ceramic *banna'i*.

The Ghiyyathiyyeh *madrasah* of Khargird (1445),[95] which is arranged along the four-*iwan* scheme around a square central courtyard, is an example of formal perfection. The corners of the courtyard open to various domed rooms and halls, which lead to the upper floors. Domed tripartite entrances provide a perfectly articulated resolution between filled and empty spaces, isolating living areas while still allowing for an unimpeded flow of traffic. R. Hillenbrand, one of the most celebrated scholars of Persian Islamic architecture, offered this description of the *madrasah* of Khargird: "The transition between successive functions is treated smoothly and naturally by the architect; his is the art that conceals art."[96] Comparisons have been made with Ghuzar Gah, particularly with regard to what little remains of the well crafted ceramic details. Most likely the victim of a 1948 earthquake, the Jamal al-Din complex at Anau (1446–1457)[97] once served as a popular devotional site, which included a mosque, a *madrasah*, and a *khanqah*, in addition to various living quarters for pilgrims. Old photographs show a lofty sixty-six-foot (20 m) *pishtaq*, which actually obscures the dome behind it. What has most captured the attention of scholars is the ceramic mosaic inlay used to adorn the transitional drum of the *pishtaq*. This decorative feature—set in the same position as the tiger motifs in later work at the Shir Dar *Madrasah* in Samarkand—is dominated by two enormous menacing white dragons set against a dark blue background with floral patterns.[98] Two rooms flanking the *pishtaq*, which is of considerable architectural interest, lead to two open side areas within the complex, an arrangement later adopted by the Mughals in India.

Constructed one century earlier, the mosque/mausoleum of Abu Nasr Parsā in Balkh (c. 1460),[99] is reminiscent of the mausoleum of Tughtabeg at Kunya Urgench at least in terms of the floor plan (although the former has an octagonal foundation, while the latter is square). Both structures display a style that was quite popular, for instance in Khorāsān at Tayabad (1444), where a great *pishtaq*, now in ruins, partially obscured a ribbed dome set above a windowed cylindrical drum. Returning once again to Samarkand, the mausoleum of 'Ishrat Khana (1464)[100] was established by a *waqf* (religious endowment or charitable foundation) for the burial of the wives of the Timurid sovereign Abu Sa'id (born 1424; reigned 1449–1469), who is also said

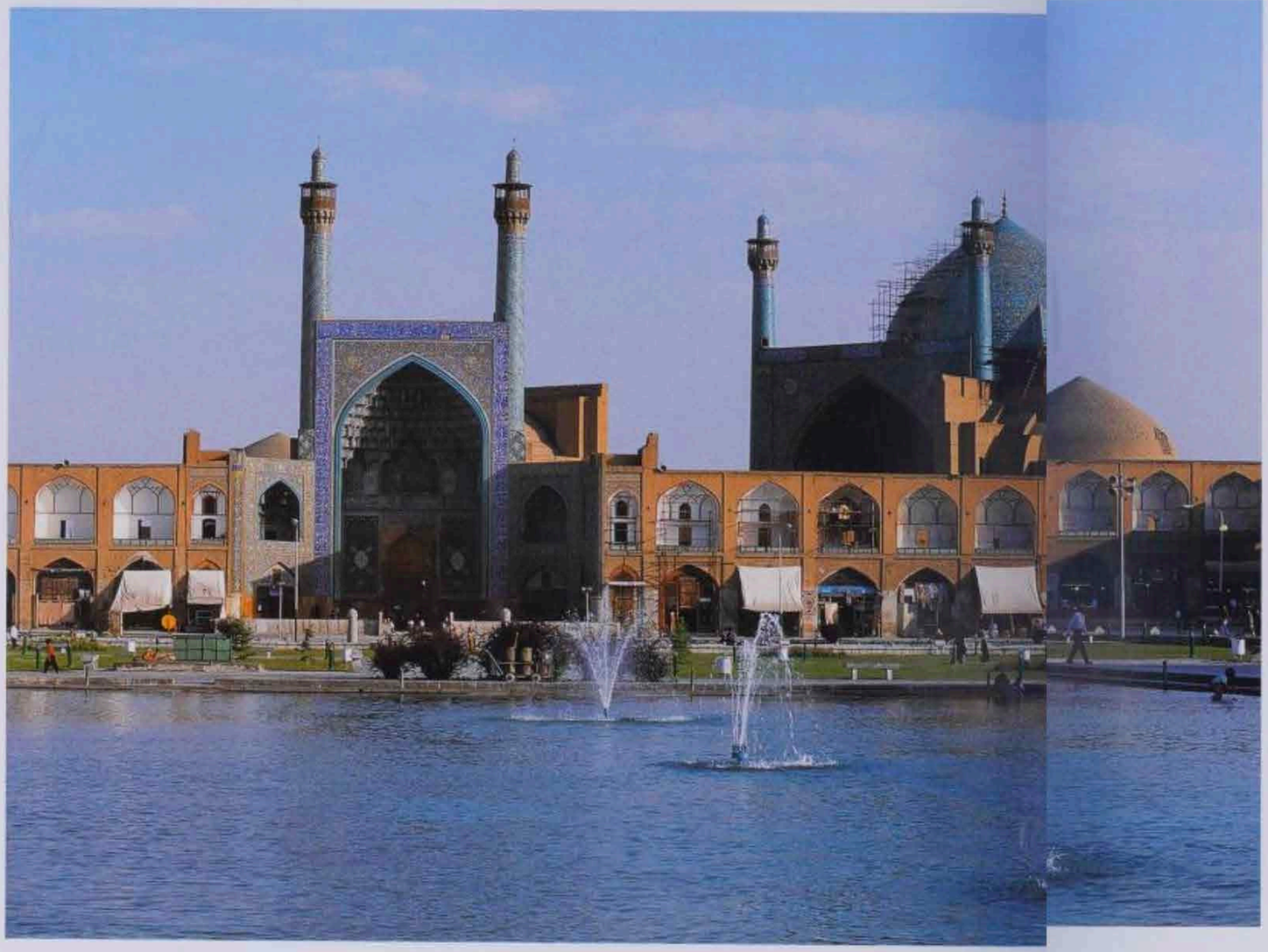


to have been a renowned agronomist. The great entry *pishtaq* (without minarets) is hardly a novelty. However, the tripartite division of space into a series of lateral domed rooms and a nearly cruciform central space, also surmounted by a dome, are quite unusual.

We shall conclude this tour of central Asian sites with two monuments built after the Timurid period, but which include many similar features. Both structures are located in Bukhara, a city that still preserves a magnificent late-medieval atmosphere, despite the intrusive plethora of souvenir stands plying their wares to the masses of visitors. The Kalan ("Great") Mosque, near the splendid eponymous thirteenth-century minaret, is a Shaybanid[101] structure completed in 1514. The classical four-*iwan* design is rhythmically accentuated by the inclusion of harmonious arcades around a central courtyard. The *iwan* preceding the main domed hall has been replaced by a *pishtaq*. The complex is incredibly vast and in this regard echoes the monumentality of other Timurid structures. It is said to have held as many as 120,000 congregants at a time. The Abd al-Aziz Khan *madrasah* (1645–1680),[102] a significantly later building, also follows this grand scale. The tripartite entryway and the short diagonals cutting into the central courtyard seem to have been inspired by Khargird, the harmonious balance of which is regrettably absent. The *pishtaq* is given the traditional lateral blind niches, as well as a pediment decorated in predominantly yellow ceramic tile. Within Iran itself, Timurid changes were not particularly important.

Only two major monuments are worthy of mention that date from the fifteenth century. Located in Ardabil, a city north of Tabriz, is a sanctuary dedicated to the mystic Shaykh Safi al-Din al-Ardabili (plates 147–48, 1252–1334). The sanctuary's brotherhood is the source for the name of the Safavid dynasty. This structure, with its complex design—the result of various alterations from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries—is significant from both an architectural and a political perspective.[103] The cylindrical, domed tomb is completely surfaced in glazed bricks that form a Kufic devotional inscription to Allah. The elongated appearance of this structure is reminiscent of Timurid architecture, although it is unique. A *pishtaq* with a lovely turquoise

147–148. Funerary complex of Shaykh Safi al-Din at Ardabil, overall view (ABOVE) and detail of entrance (OPPOSITE)



149. The great square commissioned by Shah 'Abbas in Esfahān. In the background, the mosque that bears his name.

ceramic facade and a long hall situated in front of the tomb create a harmonious ensemble that initially seems quite disordered. The Safavid hall (*Chini Khana*, or "House of Porcelain"), which was built to hold the collection of more than 1,100 pieces of Chinese porcelain donated by Shah 'Abbas I in 1611,[104] is interesting. The base of this building has a skirting board in glazed ceramic and plaster niches molded for the exhibition of porcelain. There is also a beautiful garden divided into four sections (the *Chahar Bagh*),[105] which forms an integral part of the complex.

Even though it long languished in ruins, the Blue Mosque of Tabrīz (completed in 1465)[106] is one of the most important monuments of the second half of the fifteenth century. Until the mid-1970s, only a few of the structures in this complex were visible. Partial restoration extending over many years has finally revealed the contours of this mosque, although the construction of a completely new dome has raised legitimate questions, particularly since there were no traces of the original dome shape. Access to the mosque is through a grand gateway (still intact down to the ceramic mosaic decoration), which leads into a domed hall. This initial space is surrounded on three sides by vaulted or domed rooms: a sort of *riwaq* or portico around the central courtyard, which, as mentioned, is domed. Behind this hall, which is accessed by two

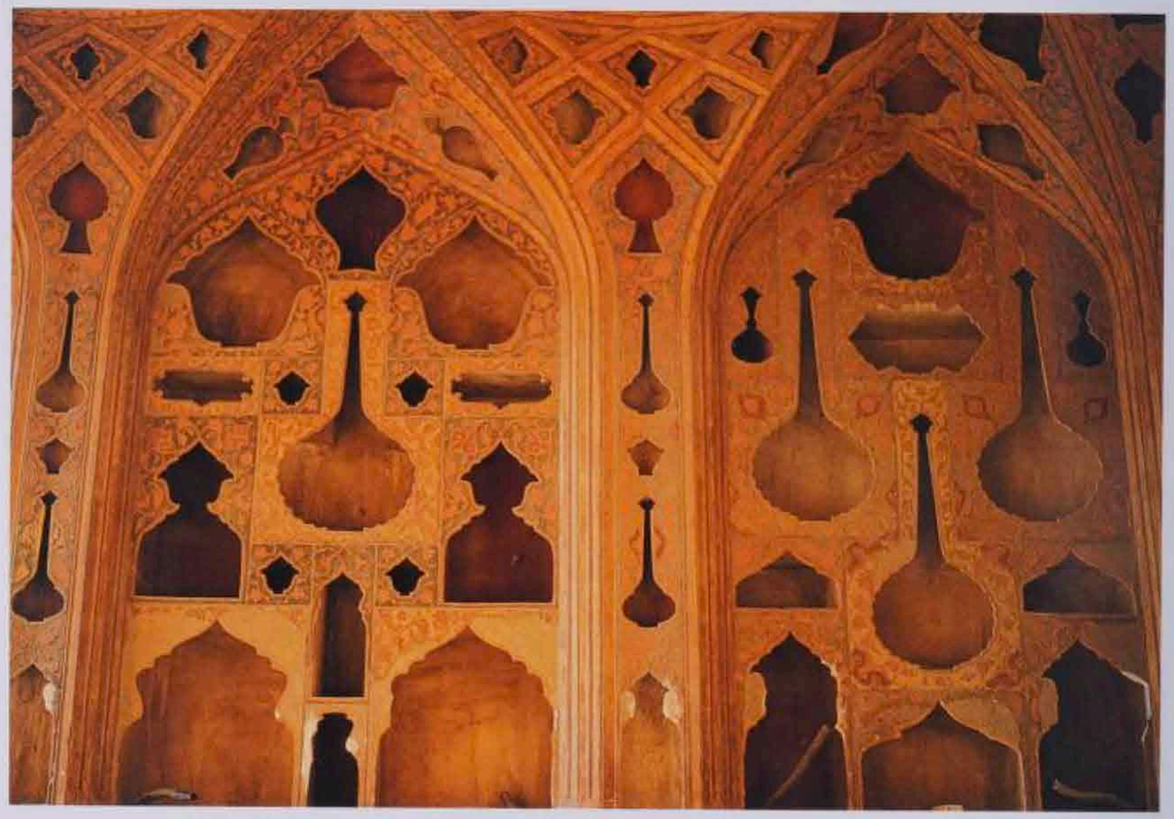
passageways running along the sides of the *mihrab*, is another, smaller hall, also with its own *mihrab*. The structure follows something of a T-shaped plan, which was common in Turkey (logical, given the geographical proximity to Tabrīz), and was also motivated for climatic reasons. Elegant and highly original decoration graces the interior walls, which stylistically seem to follow the motifs found on carpets from this period (see "Flowers in Wool: Persian Carpets"). The prayer hall is covered in intense ultramarine tiling with striking gold motifs. The discreet yet spectacular effects created by the decoration of this mosque (the green, blue and gold used in the early fifteenth century in Bursa, and the blue and white tiling at Muradiye in Edirne (1435), were all the work of artisans from Tabrīz, and even the architect who created the mosque of Sultan Selim in Constantinople hailed from this Iranian city), are indeed unique, and serve as a perfect introduction to the splendors of the Safavid period.

THE SAFAVIDS

In 1501, the young and charismatic Shah Isma'il I (r. 1487–24) came to power in Iran, creating a vast empire. In their constant battles with the neighboring Ottoman Turks, the Safavids formed alliances with the nations of Europe, and emissaries were sent by Louis II of Hungary and Charles V, as well as Venetian delegations who named the king Sofi, or sage;[107] twelve Imam proclaimed Shiite Islam the official state religion.[108] Immersed as Shah Isma'il was in the activities relating to conquest and organization of power, no major architectural projects were initiated during this period. During the long reign of his successor Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–76), a series of mosques was built in the area of Marāgheh,[109] characterized by hypostyle structures supported by colonnades with *muqarna* capitals, generally painted in floral patterns.

The main square in Kermān was commissioned by governor Ganj Ali Khan[110] in the beginning of the seventeenth century and possibly inspired the urban reforms undertaken by Shah Abbas I (1588–1629) in Esfahān, where the empire's new capital was established in 1597.[111] Aided by a team of architects, Shah Abbas I transformed the city,[112] which became home to at least four different ethnic and cultural groups. The city's ancient core—the medieval northeastern quadrant, from the axis of the Zayanda-Rud River—comprised the oldest Muslim settlement; the northeast sector, dominated by Tabrizabad (the old capital, the preferred name for which was given by the king of Abbasabad) was home to many Muslim immigrants from Azerbaijan (mostly of Turkish language and origin), as well as a significant Christian minority (mostly Syrians and Georgians); Armenians, who arrived en masse after forced deportation from Julfa, settled in their own quarter, called New Julfa,[113] in the southwestern quadrant. The last important community, comprising the *Gabri* or *Kafir* ("infidels," in this case Zoroastrians), would reside in the city's southeastern section. Under Shah Abbas, Esfahān became a great city, which also included a large Jewish community (the descendants of Yahudiyya, where the Masjid-i Jum'a was founded), as well as some Europeans and a group of Hindus, primarily from Gujarat, India.

In order to make his city plan a reality, Shah Abbas focused on two major projects: the creation of a great main square[114] and the construction of a new system of thoroughfares and gardens (the *Chahar Bagh*), leading to a new bridge and beyond the other side of river. These two projects covered a vast expanse, one that included primarily green areas, in which the main buildings of the imperial court were concentrated. The great square or *maidan*, with its dimensions of 1,600 by 492 feet (500 × 150 m), became the new focal point of the city. Four monuments

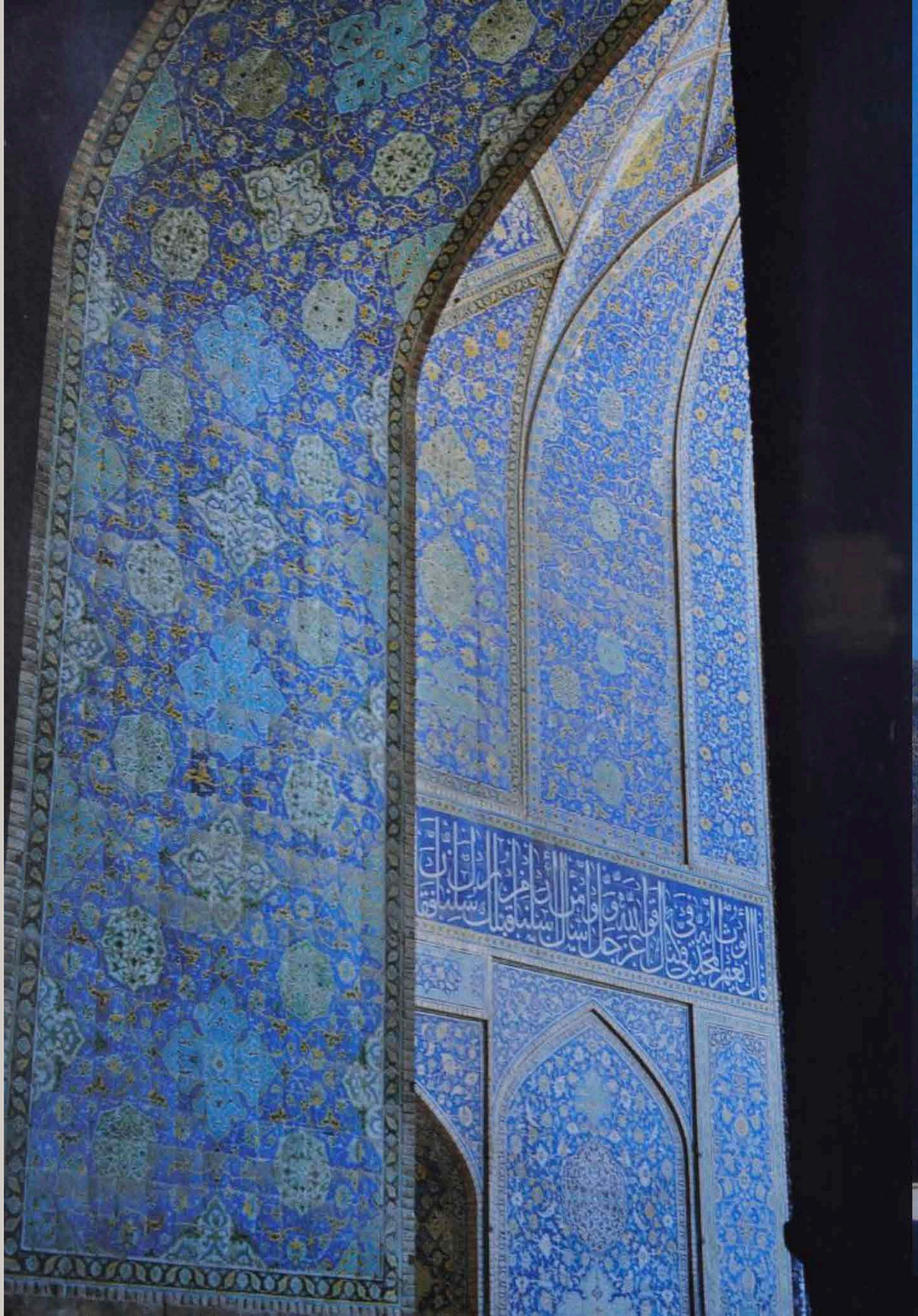


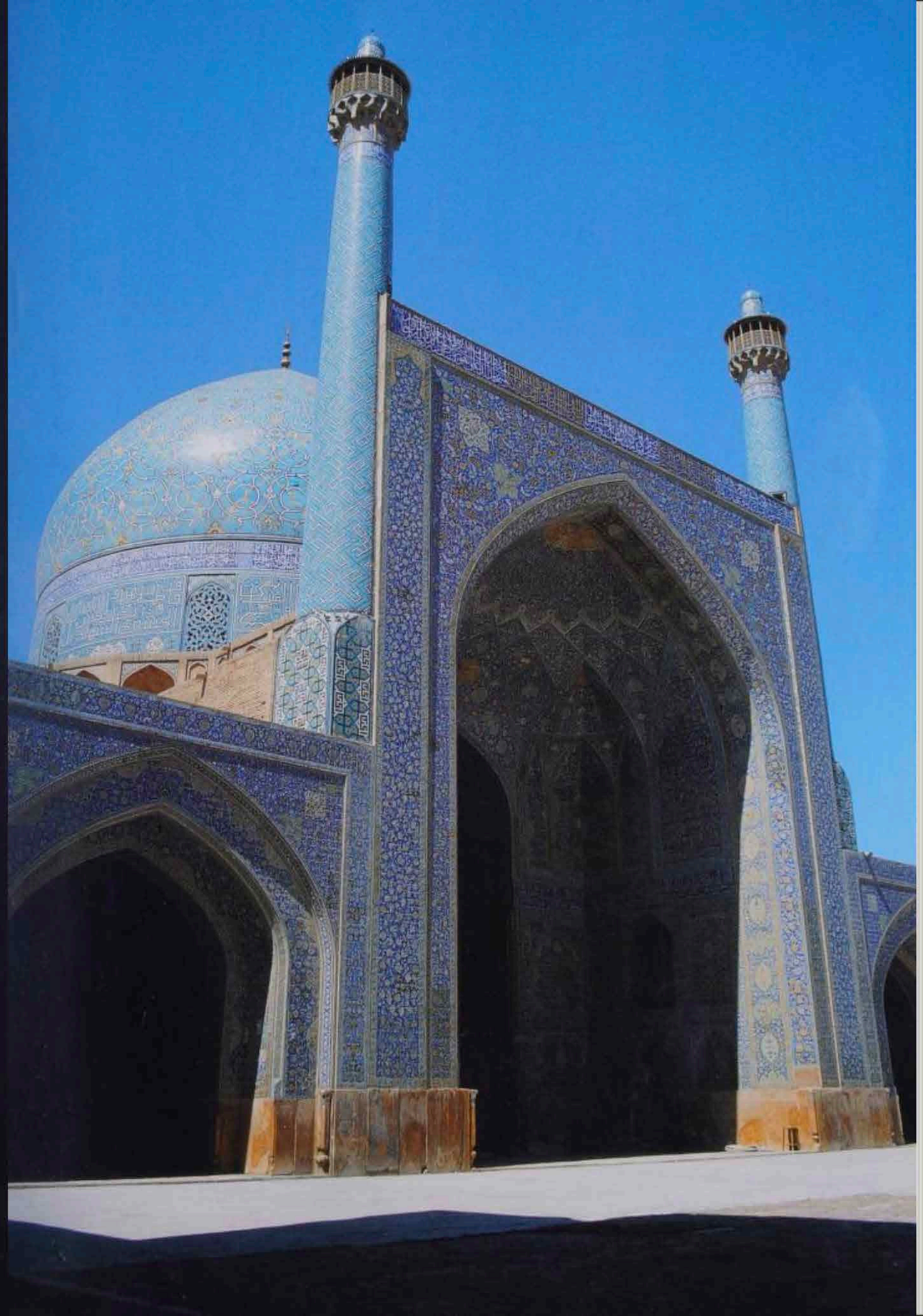
150–151. The palace of Ali Qapu (ABOVE) and detail of early seventeenth-century decoration (OPPOSITE)

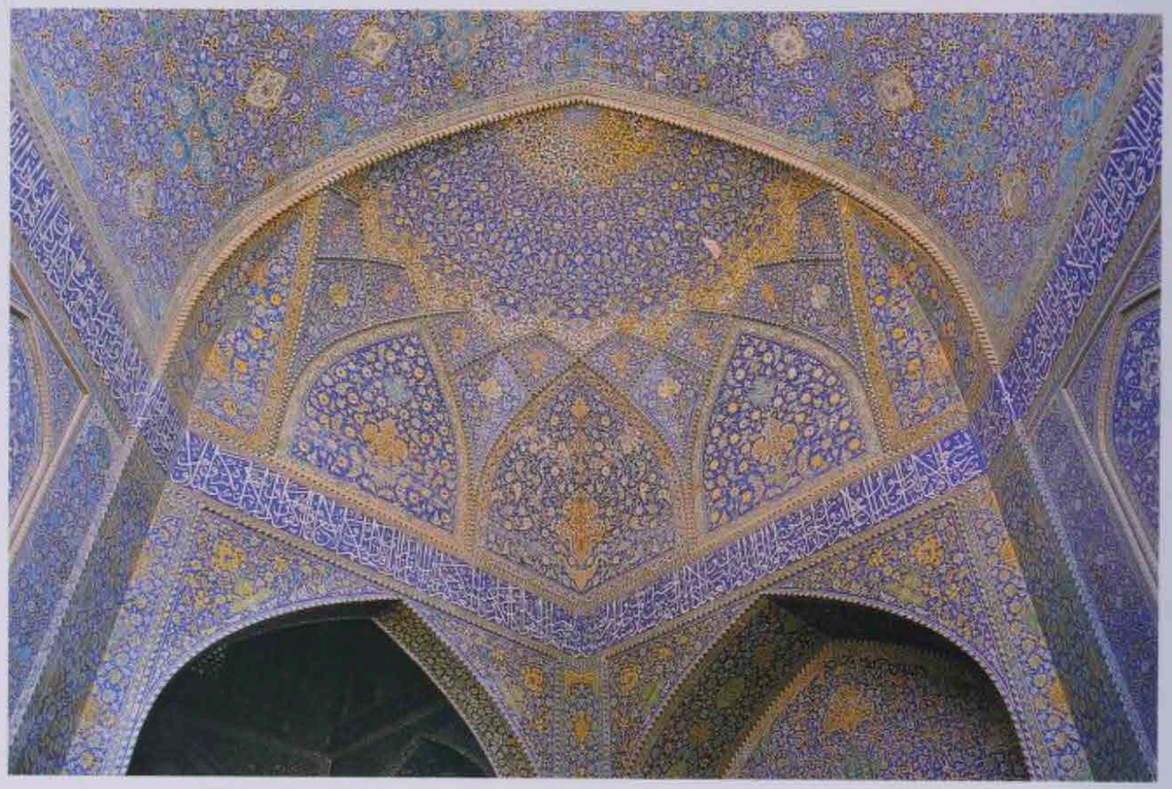
152–153. OVERLEAF. The Mosque of Shah Abbas in Esfahān, 1612–37, detail of mosaic decoration, *pishtaq* with *muqarnas*, and two lateral minarets

rose around this site, including the Mosque of Shah Abbas (1612–1637)[115]—opposite the entrance to the bazaar—which was graced by a great porticoed terrace, or *talar*, where visiting dignitaries were brought, after navigating the tortuous alleyways of the bazaar, to enjoy the breathtaking view. Two important buildings were constructed, one in front of the other: the royal mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah, and the pavilion/gate/*talar* of Ali Qapu. They interrupted the length of the square, yet they were placed closer to the mosque than to the bazaar entrance, which created an illusion of greater depth and expanse in a sort of telephoto effect. These structures were linked by arcades of niche-like rooms arranged on two levels, which were used for craftsmen or other commercial purposes. The square served several functions: as a market, as a theater for displaying equestrian skills (gate remnants of the polo area are still visible in spots),[116] and as a sort of parade ground, where military displays could be viewed from the *talar* of Ali Qapu. The Ali Qapu complex, which might have included Timurid remains, was probably the most interesting of these two structures, due in part to its multiple uses and because it was the main access point for the the *Chahar Bagh* (royal gardens). The *Chahar Bagh* was a huge park, nearly a mile long, with eight promenades lined by plane trees, originally conceived as thoroughfares. Today, aside from one remaining central tree-lined pedestrian promenade, there are two roads used for vehicular traffic. The gardens contained vast green spaces, fountains, and canals, and one day a week, they were reserved for women (mainly from the Chihil Sutun royal pavilion down to the river).

The first of the two structures to be built on the main square was the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah (1617),[117] which was reserved as a court sanctuary and thus lacked a central courtyard and minarets. Entry to the square was slightly off axis through the main *pishtaq*, which was decorated in splendid mosaic ceramic extending to the dome. The ceramics were fashioned in hazel tones with white arabesques and turquoise effects, which have earned it the name of "the creamy one." The *pishtaq* was separated from the prayer hall by an oblique wall, thus forcing visitors to turn ninety degrees down an L-shaped corridor, leading to a gateway in front of a domed *mihrab*. Right at the entrance the building, decorated in extraordinary mosaic inlay, is dominated by eight pointed arches accentuated by spiral half-columns in brilliant turquoise. Lower panels contain green arabesques, white medallions on a deep blue background, and yellow motifs. Perfectly rendered white calligraphy in the *thuluth* style is also set against a deep blue background. The dome is a triumph of balance, and if the design seems familiar, this is due to inspiration that this decoration gave to carpet patterns, with the multitude of medallion



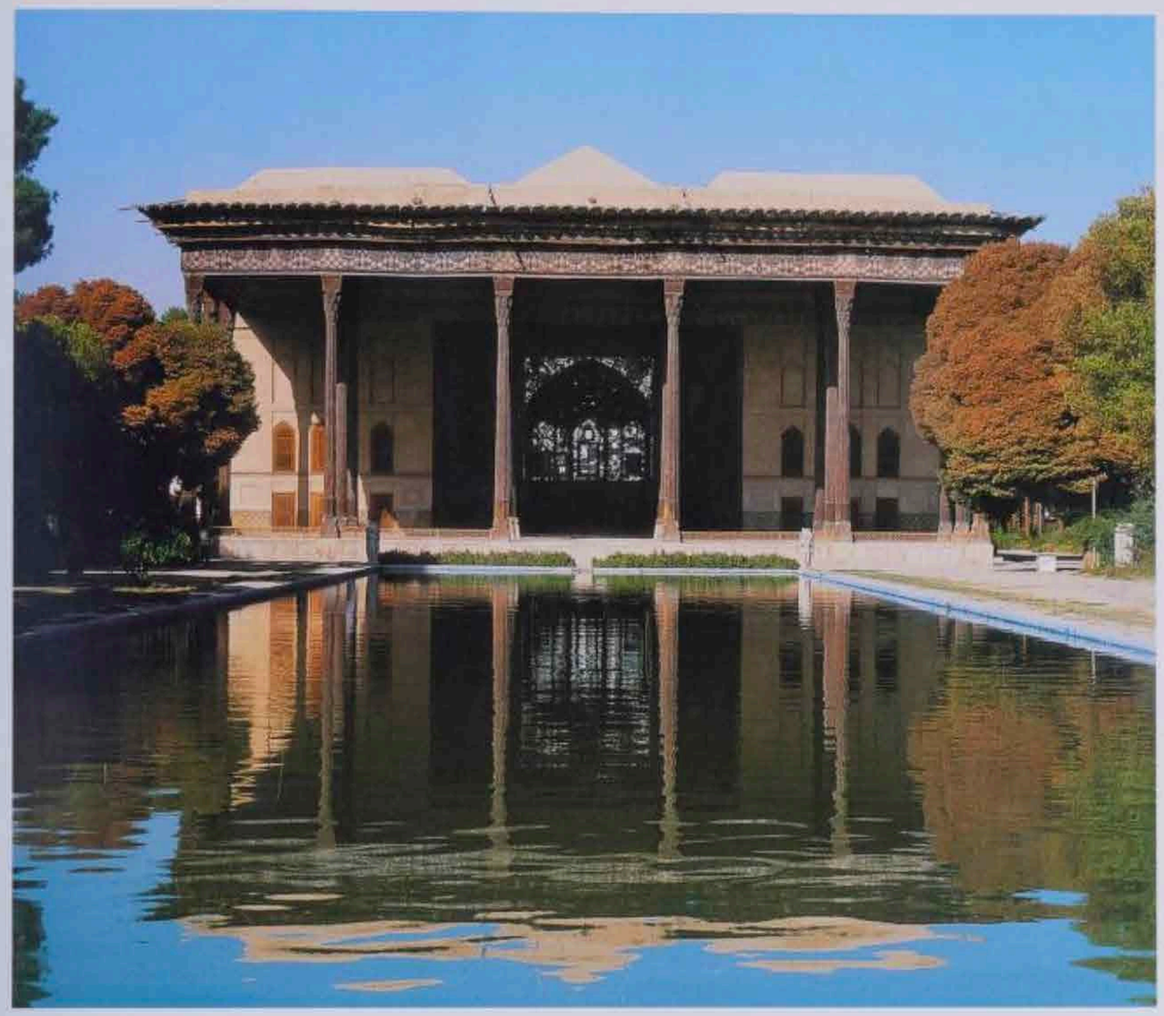




motifs. The center of the complex is arranged around a octagonal base, which extends to create first a sixteen-point and then a thirty-two-point star configuration; tiers of octagonal medallions branch out from the summit of the dome, swelling in size as they progress from the center to the sides.

The Mosque of Shah Abbas (presently the Imam Mosque), which was built between 1612 and 1637,[118] is formally and structurally the most ambitious project undertaken by the emperor (plates 149, 152–54). Visitors are "invited" into the building by the stunning *pishtaq*, adorned with *muqarnas* and two side minarets, all inlaid in exquisite ceramic mosaic. The location of the square vis-à-vis the direction for prayer forced the architects to rotate the entire building (as in the Lutfallah Mosque), which has a classical four-*iwan* axial plan. The challenging task of aligning the structure to face Mecca is masterfully resolved by shifting the axis of the northern *iwan* and its side passages; this adjustment is nearly imperceptible. The mosque is immense in size. The southern *iwan* contains two flanking minarets and precedes the main bulbous dome, while the sides of the *mihrab* prayer hall open onto two small rear courtyards and a *madrasah*. The entire facade of this monument is covered in ceramic tiling, which includes intricate, visually compelling floral panels. If the Masjid-i Jum'a in Esfahān exemplifies formal perfection in terms of structure and refined contours, the Shah's Mosque opts for a dazzling interplay

154. ABOVE. Detail of vestibule, the Shah Mosque, Esfahān.



155. ABOVE. The so-called Pavilion of the Forty Columns, Chihil Sutun, Esfahān. The name derives from the twenty columns of the main arcade, which are doubled by the reflection of the large pond in front of the palace.

156. OVERLEAF. Pol-i Khwaju Bridge, Esfahān.

between color and light, creating singular effects of suspended luminosity. We have already described the position, public uses, and mixed characteristics of Ali Qapu (plates 150–51),[119] where the terrace or *talar* is supported by tall wooden columns with *muqarna* capitals, recalling Marāgheh, or perhaps even the ancient Achaemenid *apadana*. It served as an entrance to the royal gardens,[120] a pavilion decorated with beautiful paintings[121] and a sort of "music room" with molded walls in painted plaster, quite similar to those at Chini Khana in Ardabil.

As mentioned, the rear of Ali Qapu opened onto an immense green area—similar to the parks that graced Samarkand during the Timurid period, according to Clavijo's account[122]—with pavilions, ponds, canals, and halls, as well as other structures, such as a harem, stores, libraries, kitchens, and laboratories. In short, it was a city within a city.[123] The most famous of these pavilions—probably built by Shah 'Abbas II (r. 1642–66)—is the Chihil Sutun, or Pavilion of the Forty Columns (plate 155).[124] This name is taken from the illusion created by the large pond in front of the building (with its portico of high columns topped with *muqarna* capitals), which seems to double the number of the pavilion's columns. The proliferation of water, fountains, and canals are original features of Safavid architecture. Chihil Sutun, which gracefully integrates exterior and interior space, is actually a large hall divided into three domed sections with connecting rooms. One enters the pavilion through a beautiful square space with mirror-inlaid soffits

(materials possibly brought from Venice), while the walls are painted with figures dressed in European fashion, perhaps Dutchmen or Portuguese. Pavilions of this type must have been quite extensively used in Esfahān and elsewhere. In this historic capital city, which was quite proud of its beauty (*Esfahān nisf-i jahan:* "Esfahān is half of the world") contains another noteworthy monument—the Pavilion of Hasht Bihisht ("The Eight Paradises"), dating from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, which is composed of a central structure and four small exterior *iwans*. The pavilion, which resembles the contemporary architecture of Mughal India, features beautiful ceramic tiles decorating the arch pediments.[125]

Returning once again to the *Maidan*, or Central Square, the fourth great structure facing this open area is the main entrance to the vast and well preserved covered bazaar, which follows along a defined path for over a mile, punctuated by *madrasahs*, mosques, baths, and caravansaries; it is also linked to the Friday Mosque. Due to the modern need for vehicular access, an opening (or disembowelment) was cut next to the mosque about fifty years ago in order to lay down a major thoroughfare, thus interrupting the graceful continuity of the complex.

Since Esfahān lies along a major river, the Zayanda-Rud, bridges were important not only for their functional uses but also as an integral part of Shah 'Abbas's master plan for the city. The oldest of these structures is the Si-o-se Pol (Bridge of the Thirty-three Arcades), which has a Sasanian foundation and which has also been used for regulating water flow. The unusual bridge is the Pol-i Khwaju (plate 156), which was built during the reign of Shah 'Abbas II, in the mid-seventeenth century.[126] This arcaded span is laid out on two levels. The upper level was intended for carriage traffic, but also contains a vaulted passageway for pedestrians. The upper level features a series of small *iwans* facing out onto the river, and a few larger pavilions to accommodate longer visits. The lower section, which is level with the river, was used to control water flow through the use of bulkheads. This level includes a series of small stairways, separated by channels, inserted so that people could enjoy a healthful respite.

The ingenuity of Shah 'Abbas I is also evident in another project, which was built in the rural areas surrounding his capital, where hundreds, if not thousands, of imposing Borj-i Kabutar (literally "pigeon towers") were built.[127] Each of these elegant and complex structures could shelter hundreds of birds. The guano that was collected (pigeons are not considered edible according to Islamic custom) was used as fertilizer, particularly for the cultivation of melons. The Shah had these structures built at public expense, to be paid out over the course of several years. As a result, tax revenues increased markedly. Shah 'Abbas also promoted modifications and expansions to the two "holy cities" of Iran, Qom and Mashhad, with the idea of launching a domestic religious tourism campaign, in opposition to the official tourism in Mecca (and in Karbala and Najaf, for Shiites), then under Ottoman control.[128]

It should be stated in closing that the largest and most important Persian gardens were built during this period,[129] as were the royal buildings at Ashraf and Farahabad.[130] There are few noteworthy examples of civil architecture from this period. Among the most interesting is the Safavid house discovered some years ago at Nayin, which is unusually well preserved and extremely original.[131] This building, structured as a series of many rooms facing a central courtyard, is richly decorated with wall paintings. Particularly significant among these are Chinese-style medallions containing dragons and phoenixes, as well as winged figures, trees, and gardens, the iconography of which is reminiscent of miniatures of the time. Safavid rule, with its magnificent capital city of Esfahān, brought to a close one of the most productive and auspicious periods in the history of Persian art.

TIMELESS FIGURES
PERSIAN MINIATURES

THE MINIATURE FROM THE SASANIANS TO THE SELJUQS

Miniatures constitute one of the most significant chapters in the entire history of Persian Islamic art. As with architecture, there is a regrettable absence of work until the end of the Seljuq era, a void that is all the more significant since it coincides with a complex period of historical transition.

Illustrated books surely must have existed in the Sasanian era, just as there was an extremely ancient and universal practice of embellishing palace walls with pictorial decoration. The widespread diffusion of the Sasanian style can be seen in the influence it had on the Tang[1] dynasty in distant China. In contrast to the large-scale excavations carried out, for example, at Neyshābur,[2] Ghazni,[3] Lashkari Bazar,[4] Takht-i Sulaiman,[5] and Siraf,[6] major projects in Iran have been only sporadic. Additionally, there is an absence of significant finds and, until a few years ago, emphasis was placed on pre-Islamic sites. This situation encouraged scholars to associate Sasanian painting with central Asia, where Soviet excavations of important sites (Afrasiyab, Pandzikant, Varahsha[7]) yielded pictorial cycles of fables and epics that can be linked to two basic texts for miniatures—the *Shah-nama* and the *Khalila wa Dimna*. This international Sasanian style was enormously popular, even though documentation about it was easier to find at the periphery of the empire than at the center, where the Arab invasion resulted in an artistic stasis, if not destruction, leading artists merely to repeat pre-established models.[8]

Another element that should not be underestimated is the use of polychrome stucco to decorate buildings. The change from stone to stucco had already taken place in Sasanian arts—as seen at Kish,[9] Ctesiphon,[10] Dāmghān,[11] and at the Chal Tarkhan palace,[12] a hybrid monument. There is no reason to assume that the use of stucco diminished with the advent of Islam—in fact, the opposite is true.

Excavations at Neyshābur[13] unearthed an enormous and diverse quantity of ceramics, all dating from the tenth to the eleventh century. The most famous, and deservedly so for their quality, are those in cobalt blue and copper green, decorated with inscriptions in Arabic Kufic script written with rose thorns, inspired by the contemporary developments in Samarra. (This work introduced the technological innovation of mixing dyes with liquid clay, a method that

resulted in very clear and stable decoration.) There are also examples of three-colored and incised ceramics that have obvious similarities to Tang dynasty works, but these have been attributed to the migration of ceramists from the Far East. (As these were typically funerary ceramics, it would be odd, to say the least, if they were traded.[14]) A different type of pottery is of interest to this discussion, namely the so-called figurative type, characterized by representations of men on horseback or standing figures, with buffware ceramic bodies decorated in black, green, manganese brown, and iron-based yellow. It is interesting to note that unlike epigraphic motifs, which are also found at Afrasiyab and in other sites in central Asia and which are generally produced in the same way, figurative ceramics are nearly exclusively found in the Khorāsān region of Iran. The decorative style is very fresh—almost naive—although it cannot be classified as folkloric (as might the work from Sari,[15] with its ornithomorphic drawings). Perhaps the iconography resembles that of a pre-Islamic past, which had not entirely disappeared, nor had it been forgotten—indeed, it was even embraced. It would not be surprising if such works come to be seen as inspired by Zoroastrian models.

During the Seljuq period representational art took hold (without forgetting the Sogdian precedents)—in ceramics, textiles, and wall paintings—with a human typology and physical characteristics quite different from earlier work. Faces became rounder (the ideal of beauty was moon-like), eyes had a stronger oblique cut (previously they were rounder), mouths were small, noses were aquiline, and eyebrows sometimes grew together as one. Fragments of wall paintings from Rayy and Neyshābur (now at the National Museum in Tehran[16] and at the Metropolitan Museum in New York[17]) clarify this shift in direction. Some typological characteristics remain: figures are viewed frontally with faces in three-quarter view, a style also found at Lashkari Bazar (early eleventh century), although those were more closely linked to Sogdian or Sasanian models, based on the drape of the clothing. There is a paucity of background elements or landscape, and the space is organized into horizontal registers, also found in *mina'i* (enameled) ceramics. This figurative pottery is interesting because it seems to constitute a distinctive iconographic source for painting, given the lack of manuscripts. A large plate (18⅞ in. [47.8 cm] in diameter) painted in this technique, now at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (inv. N. 43.3),[18] dates from about 1230 and features a scene of a siege, where the figures have "captions" with their names, evoking ancient traditions and popular epic themes. Even though the specific spatial organization is somewhat chaotic, it is noteworthy that the figures are placed in horizontal bands, which is typical of *mina'i* ceramic decoration.[19] Incidentally, a 1310 treatise on ceramic art by master potter Abu l Qasim from Kashan[20] describes how this refined technique[21] was no longer in use, a tangible result of the devastation experienced following the Mongol invasion. Ceramics decorated with luster glaze[22] are stylistically somewhat different, however, and there are examples of these from the Mongol period. These ceramics provide ample evidence of figuration, but in a more monumental pictorial style, indicating that autonomous schools and traditions flourished during the same historical period.

The first manuscript to consider is *Varqa u Gulshah*,[23] a tragic love story of two tormented youths (plate 157, c. 1200). The text is in Persian, and one of the miniatures is signed by the master Shaykh 'Abd al-Mu'min ibn Muhammad with a *nisba* (place of origin) in al-Khuwayyi (known as Khuy, an area in Persian Azerbaijan). The Persian text, the signature, and the style, indicate that this work is Persian, rather than Anatolian, which has been suggested because 'Abd al-Mu'min

157. *Gulshah Kills the Enemy of His Beloved*, from *Varqa u Gulshah*, c. 1200, Topkapı Sarayı, Istanbul, H. 841 f. 22a

appears as a witness to a document in Konya in 1252–53. The space allocated for the illustrations is a long, narrow band, one of several similarities to *mina'i* ceramics; the descriptions are quite lively and the figures have halos around their heads, exactly as in figurative earthenware.

THE VITALITY OF THE IL-KHANID PERIOD

From a documentary and historical point of view, it is interesting that these early Persian miniatures (including those on ceramics) are not very notable artistically—in and of themselves or in comparison to work that was being created at the same time in other places under Muslim rule.[24] In short, nothing during this period hinted of the spectacular developments to come in subsequent centuries. Thus the Seljuq period can be put aside with a certain sense of disappointment (especially when compared to significant developments in architecture). It is quite surprising, on the other hand, to note the incredible vitality that characterizes the Il-Khanid period. There are specific, identifiable reasons for this: the change in the climate at court, the passage from a period when power was being acquired and strengthened (the second half of

the thirteenth century, keeping in mind that Baghdad was captured with the formal end of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258); the prevailing cosmopolitanism; and above all, contacts with China and the rest of the world.[25] This is evident in a manuscript, a bestiary now in New York,[26] made in Marāgheh in the late thirteenth century (1291, 1297, or 1299). This work features different styles in two miniatures that depict, respectively, a lioness and lion,[27] and two elephants (plate 159).[28] Considering that this was a meticulously accurate work, the style of the miniatures is tremendously exuberant—the elephants seem to be dancing. The flowers and birds show an analogous attention to detail, which gives context to the main subject. The background of the miniature *Mare Followed by a Stallion* (plate 158)[29] is treated differently; it features a tree, perhaps a willow, with its gnarled trunk painted almost impressionistically, clear and indisputable evidence of Chinese influence. The Far East—not uniquely, as we shall soon see—was a crucial element in the change in style, which would mature within the framework of a profoundly transformed society with many different cultural stimuli. The Mongols were Buddhist,[30] but they were also extremely open-minded.

The vizier Rashid-al-Din was a leading figure and interpreter of this political situation: he served under two Mongol sovereigns—Ghazan (who converted to Islam and was intolerant to the point of persecution) and Oljeitu (who was suspected of having Shiite sympathies). Rashid-al-Din supervised the compilation of a monumental work, *Jami' al-Tawarikh* (History of the World), a historical compendium[31] that celebrated the dominance of the Il-Khanid dynasty, as well as great figures from the past (such as Buddha, Muhammad, Chinese kings, Biblical prophets). The text was in Arabic and Persian, and copies were sent to the main centers of the

158. ABOVE. *Mare Followed by a Stallion*, from *The Use of Animals* by Ibn Bakhtishu, c. 1290, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Ms M500 f. 28r

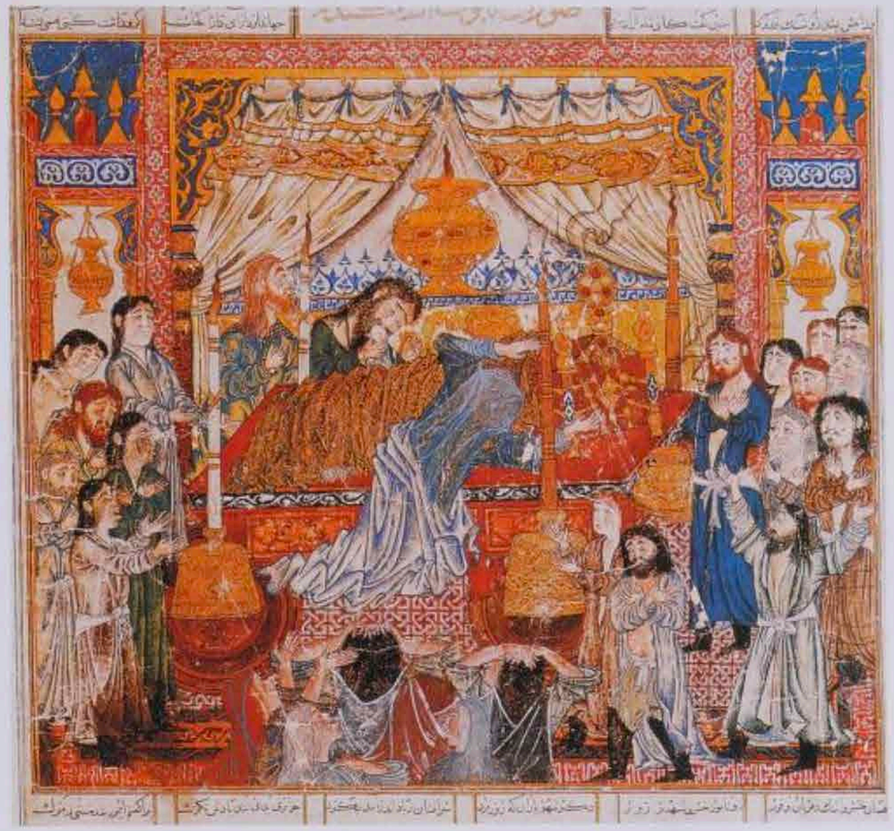
159. OPPOSITE. *Two Elephants*, from *The Use of Animals* by Ibn Bakhtishu, c. 1290, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Ms M500, f. 13r

160. *Muhammad, Abu Bakr, and a Herd of Goats*, from *History of the World* by Rashid al-Din, 1314–15. Edinburgh University Library, Ms 20 f. 57r

empire. Two examples of these survive, dating from 1307[32] and from 1314–15 (plate 160).[33] Once again, the format is long and narrow, and the colors neatly fill in areas outlined in black. As Fontana has said, they seem like "colored drawings more than paintings."[34] This corresponds precisely to a style of calligraphy from the Far East, except in the treatment of the drapery, which is deduced to have come from the Byzantine West, seen in a page now in London.[35] The relationship to the aforementioned bestiary is clearly established by the image of the *Sacred Tree of Buddha*,[36] a composition without human presence, in which the gnarled tree trunk is similar to the previously cited example. Chinese influence is undeniably very strong, but there is also Western (Byzantine) influence. Indeed, Rashidiyya (a village near Tabrīz, named for the vizier who established it) was home to a group of painters, calligraphers, bookbinders, scientists, and historians—experts whose origins and traditions were heterogeneous, but who all were engaged in the creation of a fundamental work of propaganda for the regime in power. This was a far cry from the Seljuq period, with its forced, fitful output.

This was the context for the creation of the most spectacular manuscript in Islamic art, the "Great Mongol" *Shah-nama*,[37] created around 1335 in Tabrīz. Fifty-eight illuminated pages (out of a presumed total of 190 illustrations for 300 pages of text) have been identified, and they are truly exceptional for their pictorial achievement. This is a veritable leap in quality, made possible by the international nature of Mongol society.

A famous image from this celebrated manuscript, *Mourning over the Coffin of Alexander the Great* (plate 161),[38] is in the Arthur M. Sackler and Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The dramatic scene takes place in an interior defined by two symmetrical, crenellated portals, each of which has a hanging lamp. On a platform (in imperial Chinese style) on a carpet-



161. *Mourning over the Coffin of Alexander the Great*, from the "Great Mongol" *Shah-nama*, c.1335. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., inv. 38.3. This dramatic composition has elements (the drapery of the clothing and curtains, for example) that indicate a proximity to Western Byzantine models.

covered floor, flanked by four metal candlesticks, rests a cloth-draped coffin beneath a precious mosque-lantern. In the lower foreground a group of women (mourners), seen from behind or in profile, literally pull their hair out in grief. In front of them the mother of the deceased hero kneels, her back to the viewer. On either side are two groups of male figures, their long hair worn loose in a sign of mourning. Their facial expressions are sad and inconsolable, sometimes distorted in grimaces that attest to their sorrow. Two male figures are in the background, behind the coffin; one is Aristotle, the sovereign's tutor and master. The page with *Faridun in Mourning when the Coffin of the Iraj Arrives*[39] is no less dramatic. This scene is set outdoors (symbolized in the Chinese manner by the personification of the sun in a sky filled with Chinese-style clouds). The sovereign, the elderly father of the dead hero, is held up, having fallen from his horse upon suddenly learning the dramatic news of his son's death, at the hands of his brothers. Meanwhile, people have gathered in celebration to welcome home the favorite son, Iraj.

Two other pages are also extraordinarily powerful. *The Battle of Alexander with Khārg*[40] shows the hero in a classical scene of combat with the monster. A crowd of horsemen looks on as the sovereign (in the center of the picture, astride his white steed) prepares to lower a blow with the full force of his unsheathed scimitar. The horse realistically shies away at the sight of the horrible animal. The latter has the body and paws of a lion, the wide-open jaws of a wolf, wings (almost like those of a pheasant), and a single, enormous horn—a perfect hybrid (perhaps a unicorn?).[41] A great deal of space has been given to the very evocative landscape in the background, with rugged mountains of varying heights dotted with pine trees—a Chinese convention not often seen in an Islamic context. The killing of the dragon (which never really takes place in the depiction, as the mythical beast must be fought, but the struggle between good and evil is an eternal one) is a favorite theme in *Shah-nama* painting. In a page at the Cleveland

162. *Bahrām Gur Slaying the Dragon*, from the "Great Mongol" *Shah-nama*, c. 1335. The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1943.658.

Museum of Art (plate 162),[42] Bahrām Gor (identified as the Sasanian King Bahrām V)[43] has dismounted his horse to face a serpentine monster which, already pierced by arrows, now faces the sword. This time the inspiration for the dragon is Chinese,[44] leading one to wonder if the artist had only seen artworks from the Far East. The defeated animal, tied to a gnarled tree, is an interesting beast, and details (such as the claws, the crest along its back, the horn, etc.) indicate the influence of Cathay, also apparent in the mountainous landscape (well-defined peaks and twisted trees) and the pierced rock in the foreground below the horse.[45] However, there was no exposure to Mandarin court painting (familiar to us through works of the Sung period). This is closer to Tang period work, since Islamic artists probably had contact with professional painters, such as those who worked in the grottos of Dun Huang (and also Ajanta in India), rather than the more celebrated, scholarly painters whose work never went beyond an exclusive circle of the elite. The one unfortunate feature in the Cleveland page is the representation of the horse, which is mannered, and despite a raised hoof, extraneous to the unfolding drama.

At this point it is appropriate to touch briefly on the text of the *Shah-nama* by Firdawsi,[46] which was widely disseminated in subsequent centuries, particularly beginning with the Seljuq era. The *Shah-nama* is an epic poem (some fifty-five thousand verses) that assembles and integrates legendary oral traditions. These have continued to circulate, which is very important to keep in mind, especially when an artwork, illuminated or not, breaks away from the familiar story, which is based in part on a *Pahlavi* text, now lost. It begins with the golden age at the dawning of the world under the sovereign Gayomars, moving on to Darius the Achaemenid, Alexander the Great, and the Sasanians (but not the Parthians), including Bahrām Gor and Khosrow II Parvis (and the beautiful Shirin, which is almost a story within a story), concluding with the Muslim invasion: "The era of Omar had arrived; he brought a new religion and replaced the throne with the pulpit."[47] These words resound bitterly for the bard of Iranian identity. It is precisely the Iranian character of the work, with Iranian heroes such as Zal or Rustam, Isfandyar, the rivals Ardavan and Ardashīr, and Afrasyab, the Turkish enemy par excellence, that prompts the questions: Why were there so many foreign sovereigns? How is it that the Mongols,[48] who were chiefly responsible for the dissemination of illuminated copies, if not the text itself, and also the Timurids gave this volume a place of honor in their libraries? How is it that the Safavids, under the officially Shiite rule of Shah Esma'il, championed, along with Shah Tahmasp, the most acclaimed Persian illuminated manuscript?[49] These are basic and long-standing questions,[50] but we are still a long way from finding answers that aren't purely hypothetical. Certainly, these sovereigns' desire for legitimacy was one factor,[51] as was the quest for acceptance by a culture perceived as superior, though not necessarily in that order. This, however, is contradicted by the fact that the book was a private project, not tied to public display or the need to create an "image," as we might say today. According to the penetrating analysis of Oleg Grabar,[52] the text was a diplomatic gift to other sovereigns and ambassadors, along with the equally popular work of Nezāmī; in any case, it is worth noting that stories tied to the epic exploits of sovereigns, which not only strayed into myth but also became the stuff of myth itself, persisted on a popular level (but also in more rarefied circles). From the Mongol era on, the *Shah-nama* enjoyed extraordinary success and its popularity was rivaled only by the lyrical works of Nezāmī (Abu Muhammad Nezāmī of Ganja [Azerbaijan] 1141–1209), author of the literary classic *Khamsa*.[53]

Although the "Great Mongol" *Shah-nama* is the real starting point for a consistently high-level school of Persian painting, the tradition of painting on a small format in horizontal

bands, exemplified by the *Varqa u Gulshah*, continued in workshops that remained active in various centers after the death of Abu Sa'id (1335), the last Il-Khanid sovereign, and the breakup of the empire. The main cities and courts associated with this period were those linked to the Inju style in Shīrāz and the Jalayirid style, which alternated between Tabrīz and Baghdad. The period has been studied in depth,[54] and despite the vitality of the images, their artistic achievements have not been of the highest order. A series of artworks in several albums in Istanbul (c. 1370), attributed to the Jalayirid school (loose sheets from an unbound and dispersed *Shah-nama*, and perhaps from a similarly dispersed *Mi'raj-nama* [the Book of the Ascension of the Prophet]), in the Topkapı Sarayı library,[55] are linked to the "Great Mongol" *Shah-nama*. The Istanbul album, marked by seal H.2154 (*Hazine*, Treasury) contains a text by Dust Muhammad, who was one of the book's artists (and librarian to the Safavid Prince Bahrām Mirza, son of Shah Esma'il, to whom he dedicated an album in 1544. This contains a text "Painters of Yesterday and Today," an important documentary source,[56] along with a 1606 text by Qadi Ahmad.[57] Among others, the artists Ahmad Musa and his student Shams al-Din are mentioned and credited, perhaps by Dust Muhammad himself, with some paintings now in Istanbul (Ahmad Musa is credited with the celebrated *Offering of a City to the Prophet Muhammad* [plate 163]).[58] The city has been variously interpreted as Constantinople, Medina, and Jerusalem. The miniature depicting *Isfandyar Killing a Wolf*,[59] on the other hand, is attributed to Shams al-Din. Although interesting, these works should be considered with caution because their language is so imaginative and bombastically celebrative[60] in comparison, for example, to Mani, founder of Manicheanism, who, according to legend, was unsurpassed as a painter.

A 1396 manuscript created in Baghdad, consisting of three poems by Khwaju Kirmani,[61] contains nine miniatures, including *The Marriage of Humay and Humayun*,[62] signed by the painter Junayd, to whom the other miniatures are also attributed. In the course of little more than seventy years Persian miniatures achieved a state of near-perfect composition, style, elegance, and balance. Artists were inspired by this ideal and genre until at least the late sixteenth century, that is, well into the Safavid period. There is some point, therefore, in analyzing such works in order to understand the mechanisms established by Junayd and continued by his followers. First of all, it should be emphasized that the miniatures are an integral part of the text, from which they cannot be separated. Illustration, even in the physical act of execution, did not stand alone, but was integrated with and completed the written component, which in some instances was copied by a famous calligrapher. In Islamic art—and Persia is no exception—the copyist is often the true protagonist in the book. The names of many more calligraphers than painters have been handed down through history, underscoring the leading role of this art form. Text and pictures inform each other, alternately clarifying and completing each other in a way that may have no equivalent in western art. Often, if not always, miniatures are traversed by lines of text.

Despite the fact that this work was essentially private in nature, the miniaturist's position was rather delicate[63] given the alleged prohibition against images or iconoclasm. In any case, prudence was required to avoid accusations of deliberate representations of reality that usurped the role of the creator, which belonged to God alone. This reveals a very interesting ideological schism that should merit deeper inquiry. Certain characteristics are quite clear: the absence of shadows keeps figures from appearing lifelike, and the interweaving of perspective planes (as, for example, in the miniature by Junayd), the frontal view of the protagonist, the

163. *The Offering of a City to the Prophet Muhammad*, from a Mi'raj-nama, now dispersed. c. 1370, Topkapı Sarayı, Instanbul, H. 2154 f. 107r. It is interesting to note that artists depicted even the face of the Prophet until the late fourteenth century.

foreshortened architecture, the carpets seen from above, the women of the harem gazing out from a window, and the staircases depicted in perspective work together to create an unnatural, completely unrealistic totality. On the other hand, realistic, even naturalistic, elements abound in the portrayal of clothing, lamps, vase (Chinese celadon, perhaps, and if so, certainly not an invention), curtains, carpets, and almost certainly the tile facades of the architecture. The faces, however, are standardized and immobile, although the young girl modestly covers her mouth while the women examine her sheets for signs of her virginity. There is a remarkable synthesis between movement and stasis. The model is predominantly static, almost ideally Platonic, and the observer—who is alone and engrossed in a personal examination—needs to apply his knowledge of the text, his interpretation, and his imagination in order to add details that may have been omitted, not because they were overlooked, but because they can only be inserted by the admirer. The same is true with other art forms; looking at a stucco *mihrab* (niche) or a wooden *minbar* (raised platform) decorated with geometric motifs or arabesques, the viewer has complete freedom to decide where to look next. This is why it is said that Islamic art has a kaleidoscopic effect, even if artists did not hesitate to suggest their own points of view.

Another miniature from the very same manuscript, *Humayun at the Gate of Humay's Palace*,[64] perfectly highlights the Arcadian ideal that inspired the painter and his relationship with nature. Moreover, if the practice of painting elements (such as a tree, a dome, a rock) beyond the limit of the page frame did not begin at this time, it was now perfected and became indispensable. This was a way to emphasize that nothing is finite, closed, or definitive, that in the end everything continues, everything is a fragment of an infinite reality, of which we can perceive only an instant, since infinity belongs solely to God. A third and final miniature in this exceptional artistic document, *Battle of Humay and Humayun* (plate 164),[65] confirms what has already been said about the relationship to nature and the use of recurrent elements (the circularity of the scene, the stream at the bottom, the rocks that seem like personifications,[66] the processions of birds). Even though this miniature may lack expressive power and characters (which Bihzad, the greatest painter of the time, would have added) and is slightly academic (the clash of the horses replicating that of the heroes looks as though it could have been choreographed by Diaghilev), it is, together with others of the same manuscript, one of the milestones of this art form.

MINIATURES DURING THE TIMURID PERIOD

The art of the miniature made great strides during the Timurid period. This was the result of both relative political stability and also a series of sovereigns and princes who were avid bibliophiles and who left an important mark on Iran's cultural and artistic landscape. A brilliant military leader, Timur (known as Tamerlane in the West, 1336–1405), deserves special mention. Originally from central Asia and head of a clan that professed to be Mongol (Timur, of course, claimed descent from Genghis Khan), he was actually a Turk from the Samarkand region. Timur led innumerable westward invasions and occupied the Iranian plateau for over a fifteen-year period, beginning in 1380. His military campaigns were marked by butchery, such as a massacre in quarrelsome Esfahān, which is said to have taken the lives of seventy thousand people. Timur then pushed farther west with campaigns in the Caucasus (and from there moved on to Moscow), Syria (the sacking of Damascus in 1401), Anatolia (where in 1402 he defeated and captured the Ottoman Sultan Bayazit in a battle near Ankara before traveling to the Mediterranean

164. Junayd, *The Battle Between Humay and Humayun*, from *Three Poems* by Khvaju Kirmani, 1396, British Library, London, Add 18113 f. 311.

coast at Smyrna), and India (where he took Delhi). Finally, not yet worn out, Timur turned to Samarkand, which he intended to use as his base for launching an attack on China. Timur died at Otrar in 1405, in the midst of this undertaking. Ruy González de Clavijo, an ambassador of Henry III of Castile, spent more than two years in pursuit of Timur, and his account is an extremely interesting source of information about Timur and his court, and a vivid portrayal of the East at the time.[67]

After Timur's death his son, Shahrukh, prevailed in a war of succession.[68] Born in 1377, he ruled from 1409 to 1447 and moved the capital of the empire from Samarkand to Herāt (a move that was immortalized in the game of chess with the term "to castle"). This signaled the start of a relatively long period, nearly the entire fifteenth century, during which the frenzy of conquest that characterized Tamerlane's life gave way to a division of power among a series of sovereigns and princes, in accordance with a traditional hereditary pattern of Mongol command. There was no centralized political power in the empire as occurred in Mongol times, but the separate courts witnessed a flowering of the arts, poetry, and science. Timur's nephews included Ulugh Beg (1394–1449), the great mathematician and astronomer, who ruled Samarkand until 1449, and his brother, Baysunghur (1397–1433), who ruled first in Tabrīz and then in Herāt. He was an extraordinary man of letters who, among other accomplishments, brought out a critical edition of the *Shah-nama* in 1426, which is still the version in use today.

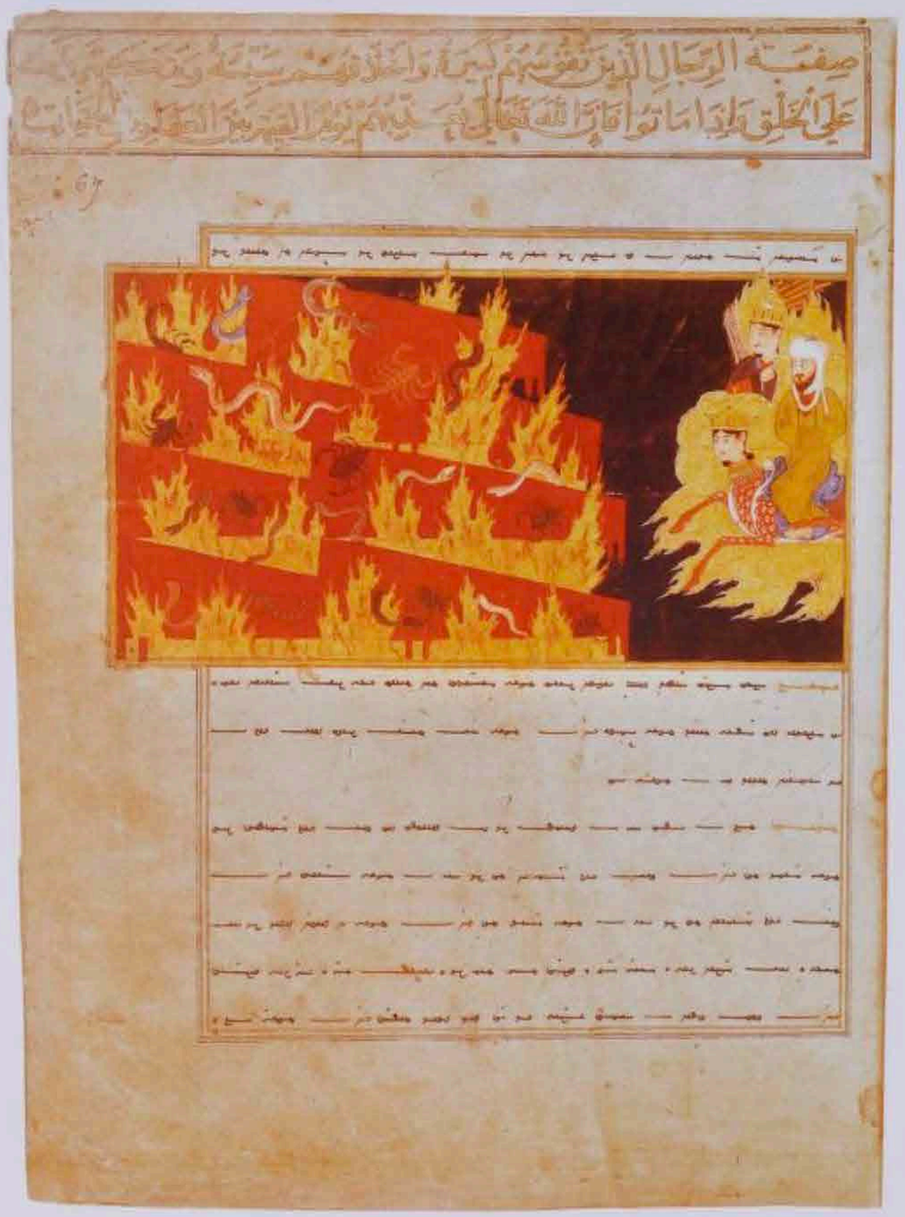
The courts that were significant for the production of miniatures were those of Pir Muhammad (r. 1392–1400), Iskandar (r. 1409–15), and the court of the latter's cousin, Ibrahim Sultan (the son of Shahrukh; r. 1415–35). All these courts were first located in Shīrāz, and then in Herāt during the reigns of Abu Said (1451–1469) and Sultan Husayn Bayqara (1470–1506). Abu Said's realm was challenged by powerful Turkmen rivals,[69] the Qara Qoyunlu (People of the Black Sheep), who occupied Herāt under Jahanshah in 1458) and the Aq Qoyunlu (People of the White Sheep), who gained control of Herāt in 1470 under Uzun Hasan. The latter sovereign was active militarily, politically, and diplomatically. He attempted an anti-Ottoman alliance with Venice—an alliance that endured only on paper, but which received official imprimatur in the form of diplomatic gifts, still in the San Marco Treasury.[70] Under Husayn Bayqara's reign, Mir 'Ali Shir (1441–1501) served as vizier—the prime minister who was in charge of public affairs. Known as Nava'i ("the melodious one"), he was also a poet and bilingual writer in Turkish and Persian. Of Chagatay descent and thus not from the Turkish-Mongol aristocracy, but from the class of *bakhshi* (musicians) and scribes,[71] he became the patron of a painting workshop headed by the artist Hagi Muhammad. The painter Kamal al-Din Bihzad (acknowledged as among the great Islamic miniaturists, if not the greatest) was active in the cosmopolitan capital of Herāt before moving to Tabriz. From an artistic point of view, this period, more or less the fifteenth century, is notable for the shift of the major schools and workshops involved in book arts from western Persia (from Tabrīz all the way to Baghdad) to the east, in Khorāsān, and central Asia (Samarkand, Herāt, and then the autonomous artistic current known as the "Bukhara school").

Central Asian society—we don't know whether from Herāt, Samarkand, or another center farther east—produced some exceptional pictures at the beginning of the fifteenth century (1425 at the latest), which are notable both for the quality of the painting and the subject matter. They are found in two of the aforementioned four albums in Istanbul (H.2153; H.2160) and either

165. Muhammad Siyah Qalam, *Nomad Encampment*, early fifteenth century, Topkapi Sarayi, Istanbul, H. 2153 f. 8v. A work from central Asia (with strong Chinese influences) by the most emblematic Muslim artist.

bear the signature of or are attributed to Ustad Muhammad Siyah Qalam (Muhammad of the Black Pen),[72] a mysterious individual. The pictures on unbound sheets are clearly influenced by Chinese art (some were even painted on silk scrolls) and are dissimilar in subject matter and feeling. The most interesting, even disturbing, works are a group that seem to depict scenes of nomadic life (plate 165) and groups of shaman (or *jinn*?), sometimes monstrous figures, engaged in bloody combat or ritualistic scenes. No text has yet been identified for which these pictures might be an illustration. Their descriptive power, with no allowance for background and with free images that float in space and time, emerges from a love of detail, from the contrast between the nakedness of the incredibly hairy subjects and the exquisite gold jewelry they wear, and from a much higher than average technical ability. Even some of the works that are clearly Chinese in derivation, such as *Nocturnal Nuptial Procession*,[73] are not easy to interpret in terms of subject matter or the identification of the protagonists. The detail is such that there is no doubt that this depicts an actual event (the nuptial journey of a Chinese or Mongol princess, escorted by Turks), but we do not know precisely which one.

We have documentation of the Shīrāz school from the period of Jalal al-Din Iskander ibn 'Umar Shakykh ibn Timur, in the form of a sheet from a manuscript of Nezāmī's *Khamsa* (the *Iskandar-Nama*), made in Shīrāz in 1410–11,[74] and which exemplifies the evolution of an art that retains the lessons of Jalayirid Baghdad and Mozaffarid Shīrāz. Along with some thematic conventions (the stream below, the gnarled tree, people or petrified animals hiding behind the abstract rocks),[75] the figures now tend to be elongated, and the compositional quality is livelier



than the somewhat academic coldness of manuscripts dating from the end of the fourteenth century. The elegance of the text on this page should also be noted. It is written on the diagonal within a refined frame that terminates in a point. The continuity of this workshop during the reign of Ibraham Sultan is apparently confirmed by the anthology[76] (now located in Berlin) that was dedicated to his younger brother Bayshunghur. The more interesting text, however, produced under the patronage of this prince is the *Zafar-nama* (Book of Victory), a historical text that celebrates Timor's exploits, what we might call a live broadcast dated from 1436. Unfortunately, it is now dispersed among various collections.[77]

One of the most active *kitabkhana*, or workshops, was in Herāt, the center of power under Shahrukh. When his favorite son, Baysunghur, died prematurely at thirty-seven (1433), power passed to the seventh son, Muhammad Giuki, who died two years before his father (1445). Min-

166. *The Prophet Muhammad's Journey to Hell*, from a *Mi'raj-nama* manuscript, c. 1430–1440, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Suppl Turc. 190 f. 67r.

167. Bihzad, *The Construction of the Khawarnaq Palace*, from a *Khamsa* manuscript by Nezāmi, 1495–95, British Library, London, Or. 6810 f. 154v. This miniature, executed with exceptional technical skill, depicts an episode that draws on themes from everyday life.

iaturists from every corner of the empire converged on Herāt, especially under Baysanghur's reign. (Shahrukh was more interested in history and in fact commissioned the anthology of historical writings by Hafiz-i Abru; he also was probably responsible for bringing to court copies of the Mongol *Jami al-Tawarikh* by Rashid al-Din, which served as a model for the genre.) Baysunghur, the most learned and enlightened of Timurid princes, was also a skilled calligrapher. If accounts are true, his work included Kufic and Thuluth calligraphy for the ceramic mosaics in the mosque built at the behest of his mother Queen Gawhar Shad in Mashhad. Traces of the era of Baysughur's reign in Tabrīz can be seen in the Jalayirid style of painting, and perhaps also in the organization of the workshops. According to a manuscript from 1427 by the workshop superintendent Ja'far al-Baysunqur, the atelier gradually became more specialized, with four calligraphers, six decorators, two decorators/painters, two painters, three bookbinders,

one border illustrator, and two designers. A Timurid *Anthology* dated July 27, 1427 was acquired by the noted art historian Bernard Berenson and is now at the villa I Tatti in Settignano.[78] Some scholars have even seen these miniatures as a form of portraiture, but it should be clarified that they are idealized representations.[79] The most striking matter about these works is their formal rigor. With the death of Baysunqur, control of the court workshops passed to his brother, Muhammad Giuki, even though it appears that the actual execution of the work came under the direction of his nephew, Prince 'Ala al-Daula. The latter brought the important painter Ghiyath al-Din from Tabrīz to Herāt. The style imposed by Baysunqur continued long after his death, as seen in the *Mi'raj-nama* manuscript (plate 166, now in Paris),[80] one of the most beautiful ever made, and in a *Shah-nama* now at the Royal Asiatic Society in London.[81] It should be emphasized that, thanks to numerous patrons and perhaps to competition among them, the first half of the fifteenth century saw a flowering of this art form, full of vitality as well as inventive and refined solutions. By this point the artistic canon was established and the artists could express their individual talents. Potential was fully exploited, with the *Shah-nama*, once again, the primary text in use.[82] Indeed, the production of manuscripts seems to have been common, almost frenetic, at this time, yet still characterized by the highest standards.

The extraordinary painter Kamal al-Din Bihzad,[83] a genius whose signature appears on masterpieces of this art form, emerged within this context. Praise of his work verges on the extreme. To cite but one: "The master Kamal al-Din Bihzad has shown us the marvelous form and uniqueness of this art: his technique [of drawing], like the brush of Mani, erases the memory of all other painters in the world . . . . One stroke of his brush, through his mastery, has given life to inanimate forms."[84] With Husayn Bayqara as patron, the workshop (or *kitabhana*, literally: "house of the book"), headed by Mawlana Mirak Naqqash, counted several masters among its artists. The fact that vizier Mir 'Ali Shir Nava'i had his own studio supervised by the painter Hagi Muhammad is interesting. Bihzad was active in Herāt in the last quarter of the fifteenth century and then supervised what would become the Safavid school in Tabrīz. He was a key figure, artistically as well as historically, in the way he bridged the late Timurid and early Safavid eras.[85] In light of the master's fame within his lifetime, it is obvious that not every artwork bearing his signature was created by his own hand. Although a definitive body of work has not yet been established, scholars agree about the unquestionable attribution of certain works, such as the *Bustan* "Garden" of Sa'di manuscript (the great thirteenth-century poet from Shīrāz), created in Herāt in 1488 for Sultan Husayn Bayqara (now in Cairo's National Library).[86]

The composition of the illustration *Court Reception*, spread over two pages, highlights precisely how Bihzad, although continuing in the earlier tradition, makes the entire work freer and less frozen formally, imbuing the figures with naturalness (although they are neither portraits nor realistic pictures), creating an expectation that breaks with accepted precedents. Where previously no more than a glance was needed to perceive the sense of the painting, Bihzad shows details and specific incidents, allowing the viewer to become an active participant in the event, yet with complete respect for the historically established conventions. The left side of the illustration shows two figures engaged in conversation on a carpet beneath a domed tent and another covering that seems like a tapestry or textile. Across from them on a terrace—skillfully rendered in perspective, surrounded by a wall and a hexagonal tower—musicians and servants prepare a feast. A subtle atmosphere of excitement and expectation prevails. On the right page, a large terrace (perhaps a *talar*, although it lacks columns) looks out over the surrounding landscape of trees with tall trunks and a grassy, flowering hill. On the terrace some people are drinking, others are dancing, and servants are bearing food. The entrance on the right is splendid, depicted in careful detail. A servant emerging from the partially closed door threatens to strike an unwanted guest who seeks to barge in on the festivities. It is precisely this well-thought-out blend of classicism and nearly realistic description, with ironic sketches and views from everyday life, which makes Bihzad's work unique. A *Khamsa* by Nezāmī (Herāt, 1494) once belonged to Jahangir, the Mughal sovereign of India (r. 1605–1627), who made marginal notes in his own hand, attributing sixteen miniatures to Bihzad (now at the British Library).[87] It reveals the artist's exceptional ability, in both the more classical representations of interiors (fol. 214r), such as that of *Iskandar and the Seven Sages*, which has complex architecture, an idyllic outdoor landscape, seven individuals with varying physical characteristics and garments, and lastly, some small genre scenes, including one where a watchman sits at the threshold and looks out, bored, at passersby. There are classic outdoor scenes, such as *The Meeting of Sanjar and an Old Woman* (fol. 16), which has perfect balance and a rhythm of composition. Here the old woman is at the center, the sovereign is on horseback followed by three attendants at the right, and on the other side are four horsemen; the barely hinted landscape implies a circular space. There are also more eccentric scenes, such as *The Caliph Ma'mun Bathing* (fol. 27v) or the *Construction of the Khawarnaq Fortress* (plate 167), with stupendous sketches of lively scenes of everyday life. These works form the core of Bihzad's work. A copy of *Sanjar and an Old Woman* in another *Khamsa* by Nezāmī (c. 1490)[88] features a rocky landscape that anticipates the more complex, naturalistic architectural landscapes of the Safavid period. A figure, having dismounted his horse, fills a pitcher from a stream that rushes at the base of the rocks. Slightly above, a baby lamb suckles from its mother under the attentive eye of a shepherd. Great technical skill, an inexhaustible imagination, and studious attention to details (architectural, chromatic, and human) are the hallmarks of this artistic genius.

MINIATURES IN THE SAFAVID PERIOD

Despite all the twists and turns of its history, including during the period of Timurid domination when its political and cultural axis shifted eastward, Tabrīz was always an important artistic center. This quintessential frontier territory never experienced true stability. In the fifteenth century the Turkmen dynasties of the Qara Qoyunlu and the Aq Qoyunlu[89] vied for power and fought against the Timurid empire. Shahrukh defeated the Turkmen of Qara Yusuf and was able to hand over rule of the area to his sons, Iskandar and, especially, Jahanshah, until 1467, when Uzun Hasan (an Aq Qoyunlu) made it his capital and then passed on rule to his son Ya'qub in 1478.

In the early sixteenth century a powerful Turkish-speaking clan of Kurdish origin appeared on the scene; Esma'il I was key to this group's ascendancy. Born in 1487, he was named Shah at the age of fourteen, by which time he had conquered the Aq Qoyunlu, in 1501. He ruled until 1524, during which time he linked the fate of his dynasty to Shaykh Safi od-Din Ardabili (1252–1334), the founder of the Safavid mystic order, of which Esma'il claimed to be a descendent. Under Esma'il I, Persia became officially Shiite (Twelvers or Imamite) and was frequently compelled to face powerful rivals: the Ottomans to the west (who claimed victory in 1514) and the Shaybanid to the east (after 1512 the Safavids took control of Herāt, following a bitter battle

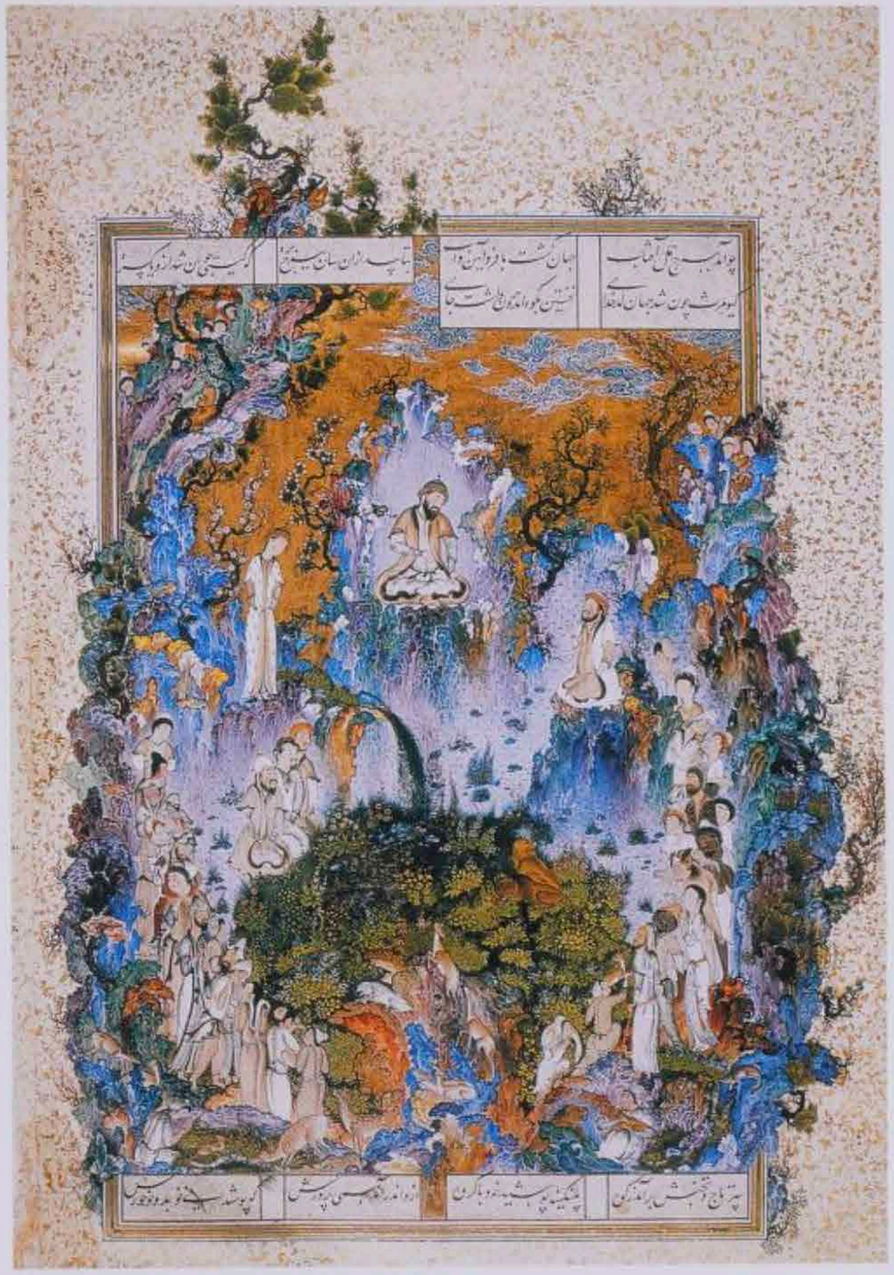
at Marv in 1510, which paved the way to the east. The capital of the empire was initially Tabrīz, but it was later moved due to the threat of Ottoman attacks. (The city was occupied by Selim I in 1514, and it was during this period that the Turks first encountered Chinese porcelain. The first significant inventories of such items in the Sultan's possession in Topkapı date from this time.) The capital of the empire moved to Qazvin (under Shah Tahmasp in 1555) and then to the even more central location of Esfahān, at the behest of Shah Abbas I (1597).

From an artistic point of view, Shah Esma'il, like most founders of great empires, left few traces of his reign as he was continuously engaged in military campaigns. Thus, the school of miniaturist art at the court of Tabrīz, which was active throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, is not very distinguishable from the Turkmen work of Ya'qub Beg, which is remembered in association with a *Khamsa* by Nezāmī.[90] Turbans with red plumes (the origin in the Turkish term *Qizil bash*—red head) became a distinctive Safavid trait.[91] According to legend, such figures appeared in a dream to the head of the mystical Safavid fraternity, Shaykh Haydar (1456–1488, father of Shah Esma'il). The headgear in question, unfailingly depicted by painters, is tall and twelve-sided, symbolizing the twelve revered Shiite imams, with what seems to be a red plume at the center. But the first golden age of Safavid miniaturist art is linked to the name Shah Tahmasp I (born in 1514; r. 1524–1576), who arrived in Tabrīz (after having served as the nominal governor of Herāt when he was only two years old) more or less at the same time as Bihzad. The latter, perhaps already old and no longer active as an artist, became superintendent of the Royal Library, to which he brought his own unquestionable prestige, as well as the style and fashions of the late Timurid period in Herāt.

The most important manuscript produced in Iran under the patronage of Tahmasp (even though it may have been commissioned by Shah Esma'il) is a magnificent copy of the *Shah-nama* (760 pages, 18 × 12⅝ in. [47 × 32 cm], with 256 miniatures) known as the "Great *Shah-nama* of Shah Tahmasp."[92] The work entailed the contribution of numerous artists, and it was undertaken in three phases. The first phase was under Sultan Muhammad (the project "coordinator"), the second phase was under Mir Musavvir, and the third was under Aqa Mirak, at least according to Dust Muhammad.[93] In addition to these artists, the names of Mirza 'Ali, Muzaffar 'Ali, Shaykh Muhammad, Mir Sayyid 'Ali, 'Abd al-Samad, and at least five other secondary painters should be added. The work took at least a dozen years to complete (the only recorded date is 1527–28), and it was probably finished in 1535. It goes without saying that the artistic level is uneven.

The most famous miniature in this celebrated manuscript is a work by Sultan Muhammad, *The Court of Gayomars* (plate 168).[94] It covers an entire page and is characterized by pictorial virtuosity and narrative imagination. The sheet is framed and the margins are decorated with sponged gold. The layout is simple and precise, with two pairs of small horizontal blocks for text below and two more above, a double block to the left, and pairs of superimposed lines to the right. This detail is extremely significant, for it determines the rhythm of the composition, which proceeds in orderly fashion, albeit with a consciously disrupted symmetry. Three sides of the frame (with the exception of the fourth side, at the bottom) are characterized by the same decorative "breakthrough," with realistic details, such as rocks and gnarled, twisted trees that clearly emerge. The scene unfolds outdoors in a harsh but idyllic landscape, with Chinese-style clouds against a sky with a gold ground. King Gayomars is at the center of the rocky landscape, sitting with his legs crossed on an outcropping, while along the sides—almost like a Trinity—are two other figures (one standing and one seated) on slightly lower mountain peaks. The bottom half of the miniature brings together a crowd that is divided into two semicircles, on the left and right. The center is dominated by a beautiful verdant landscape with a small waterfall[95] and animals of every species, especially wild beasts that are tamed by the extraordinary peace that reigns in this terrestrial paradise. The colors are soft but clear, extremely varied, and rich in contrast, creating a true symphony of images. The people, once again rather elongated, are soberly elegant, dressed in fur garments.[96]

Sultan Muhammad was a remarkable interpreter who masterfully was able to meld the Tabrīz and Herāt schools, even if here and there one sees a bit of academic mannerism, reminiscent of the coldness seen in the 1396 *Khamsa* by Nezāmī, attributed to Junayd. It is also very

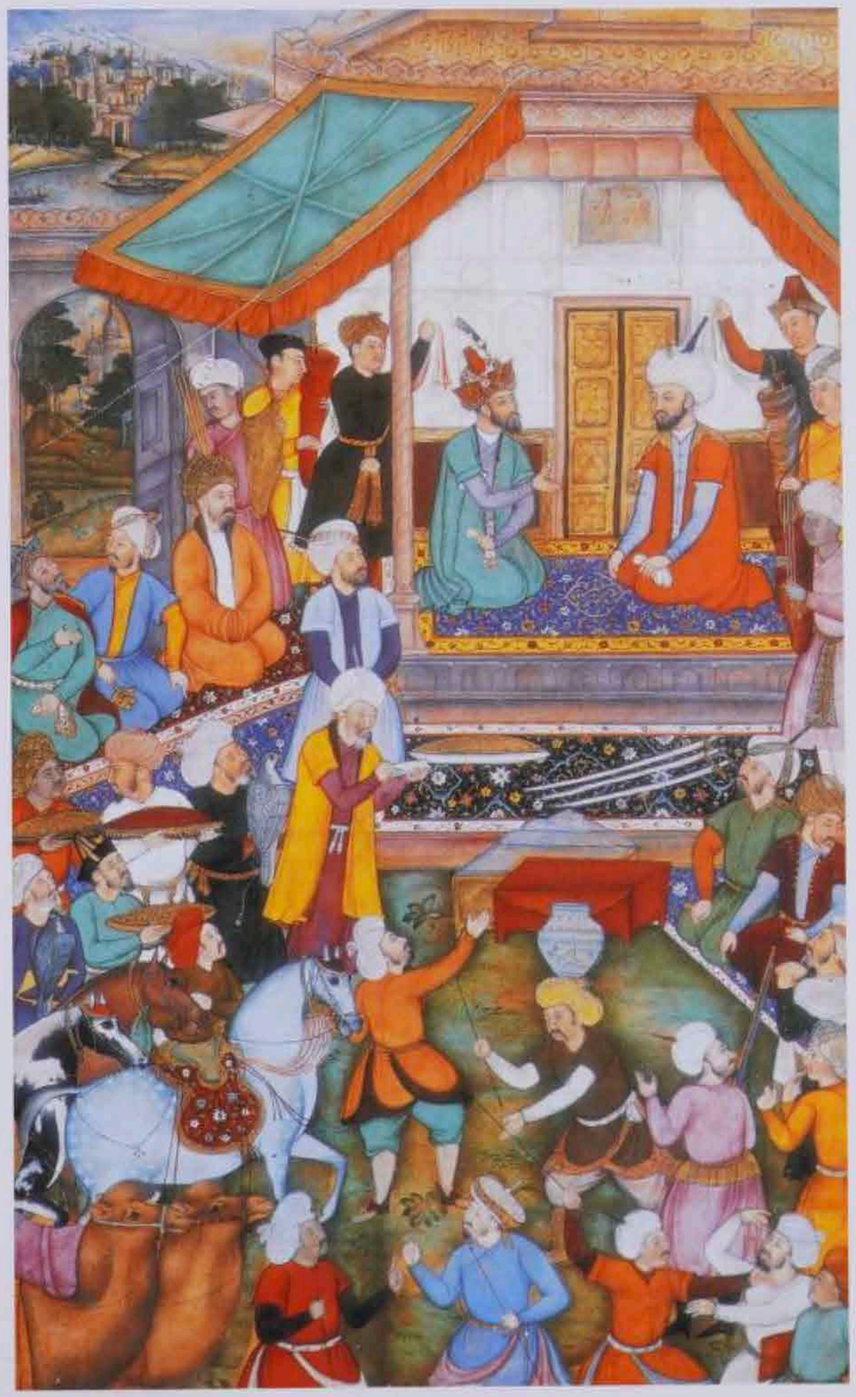


168. Sultan Muhammad, *The Court of Gayomars*, from the *Shah-nama* by Shah Tahmasp, 1525–1535. Collection of the Prince and Princess Sadruddin Agha Khan, f. 20v. The page is painted with such richness of detail and compositional complexity that it is considered one of the true masterpieces of Persian miniatures and Islamic art.

interesting to compare a miniature by Sultan Muhammad, *Sanjar with an Old Woman*,[97] with a painting of the same theme by Bihzad. In the former, the scene takes place inside a circular space (a convention already in use, but which then seemed to be particularly popular) below the usual stream (with ducks) and a crescendo of rocks that, running beyond the boundary of the frame, rise upward. Above the rocks, which are painted very abstractly (the space indicates a hill or a mountain), are trees (including a recognizable plane tree and cypress) against a background of Chinese-style clouds and a sun with golden rays in the upper left. The old woman who carries the hem of the sovereign's robe is almost identical in position and composition in both miniatures, but while Bihzad[98] had realistically depicted the sovereign bending forward to pay attention to the woman, the overall effect of this composition, which is technically superb, is much colder and more controlled.

Tahmasp's brother, Abu'l Fath Bahrām Mirza, also should be mentioned in the context of miniatures. He was an expert calligrapher (at least according to a third brother, Sam Mirza) and the sponsor of an album[99] that included the frequently mentioned preface by the Herāt painter Dust Muhammad. It was completed in 1544, when the artist was still director of the Royal Library and its workshop. He should also be credited as the artist of a signed work (c. 1540) contained in the "Great *Shah-nama* of Tahmasp,"[100] *The Story of Haftvad and the Giant Silkworm*. A painting of a rarely represented subject, the work demonstrates that the artist had fully absorbed the lessons of his teacher (Bihzad), but also had his own unique and somewhat contradictory style, expressed in strongly contrasting lines and an alternation between sometimes repetitive and banal motifs and ingenious innovations. Around 1540 artists were not only engaged in large book projects, but also painted individual pages, in a sort of portraiture. These were sometimes idealized, such as a work by Aqa Mirak,[101] but could also correspond to the truth, seen in the sheet with "Sarkhan (?) Beg," now in London.[102] It is said that Tahmasp was a controversial figure, but while not a "despicable coward,"[103] he was a troubled personality who seems to have been stricken by a powerful crisis midway through his long reign, which led him to reconsider his life's priorities. In the 1640s when the Indian Humayun, who was a refugee at the court of Tabrīz, (plate 169) asked to take several popular artists such as Mir Musavvir to his homeland with him (where he returned in 1555), the Shah raised no objections, a sign that he had lost all interest in the arts. In addition to Mir Musavvir, Mir Sayyid 'Ali, and 'Abd al-Samad also followed Humayun back to India. Although uninvited, it appears that Dust Muhammad may have joined them as well, because, it is said, he could not live without wine, which the King had prohibited by this time.[104] In 1548 Shah Tahmasp moved the capital to Qazvin and in 1556 promulgated the famous Edict of Sincere Repentance, which changed the atmosphere at court. Without completely banning artwork, this edict certainly limited the output of artists and dampened their enthusiasm. Yet as we have seen, a constant factor in the history of Persian miniatures is that production was not limited to a single workshop, but was spread among many. Thus the artists who did not follow Humayun to India (and, incidentally, those that did heavily influenced the artistic direction of Mughal miniatures) found refuge elsewhere, most significantly at the court of Ibrahim Mirza (a nephew of Tahmasp), in Mashhad.

The most notable among these artists were Shaykh Muhammad, 'Ali Asghar, and 'Abdallah-i Muzhahib, who worked on a manuscript of *Haft Aurang* (The Seven Thrones) by Jami (1414–1492), a great poet and mystic who lived at the court of Hysayn Bayqara in Herāt. Twenty-eight miniatures, completed for the manuscript over the course of nine years, are now at the Freer Gallery of Art. The miniature *Two Lovers Reach the Isle of Bliss*[105] proclaims the offspring from a



169. Sanwlah, *The Arrival of the Indian Humayun at the Court of Shah Tahmasp*, British Library, London

great school of painting. Conventional elements dominate, both morphologically and graphically; Chinese-style clouds, which had been a feature for some two centuries, are depicted here almost as spirals, leading Basil Gray to rightly compare them to the even more stylized clouds found in Chinese textiles. The plane tree, still slightly gnarled and twisted, now has an unnatural alternation of yellow and green leaves. Finally, the rocks are much flatter, and after a long process in which this motif grew ever more fanciful, now seem almost realistic.

The transfer of the Safavid capital from Qazvin to Esfahān led to a more or less automatic shift of court workshops as well. The most important work commissioned in Qazvin seems to have been a *Garshasp-nama* (Book of Garshasp), painted by Asadi in the tenth century (now in the British Library, London).[106] Shah 'Abbas I kept the capital in the north for ten years, and followed tradition by commissioning a copy of the *Shah-nama*. Produced between 1587 and 1597, this work (now at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin[107]) features miniatures signed by the important artist Sadiqi. There is no question that provincial workshops and studios remained active in centers where painting schools had long flourished, such as Shīrāz and Herāt.

A decisive shift occurred at the end of the sixteenth century, when the capital moved to Esfahān. Under Shah 'Abbas, the social, economic, diplomatic, and artistic policies led to a great period in painting (see also the chapters on architecture and carpets), a final flowering before the Safavid decline. The Esfahān school is associated with the name of the painter Riza, who was already active at the end of the sixteenth century and probably in competition (both artistically and from a generational standpoint) with the elderly Sadiqui. After Sadiqui's death in 1609, Riza became the undisputed leader in the world of painting and was accorded the honorific name 'Abbasi. Qadi Ahmad's treatise on painting[108] mentions the artist Aqa Riza (son of the artist 'Ali Asghar from Kāshān), and for some time there was some confusion as to whether this artist and Riza 'Abbasi were in fact the same person, given an uncanny number of coincidences. Riza 'Abbasi founded a school with his son Muhammad Shafi' 'Abbasi, (who derived his name not from his father but from Abbas II [1642–1667]) and other students, such as Mu'in, Muhammad Qasim, Muhammad Yusuf, and Muhammad 'Ali, all of whom, in one way or another, continued their master's style. Riza 'Abbasi did not lend his name to any particular manuscript (moreover, he signed his works most often with the phrase "drawing by the humble Riza 'Abbasi"[109]), but rather to a series of works on individual sheets of the type that had first come into fashion in 1540, with Aqa Mirak. In general, Riza 'Abbasi's painting shows careful attention to detail, with leaning and slightly curved figures[110] against backgrounds that are often painted gold, with plants, and Chinese-style clouds, following the now frequent custom for the decoration of the borders of illuminated manuscripts. Two of Riza Abbasi's well-known paintings provide an opportunity for reflection and comment. *Young Man Dressed in Blue* (plate 170)[111] is a classically idealized portrait of a fashionable youth, executed with painstaking detail. The other painting, in the same museum,[112] *The Archer Nashmi*, is quite different, almost caricature-like. The figure in this painting has a unique physique (nothing at all like the "beauty" in the aforementioned picture): square jaw, pointy nose, large mouth. His clothing does not conceal the prominent belly of a gourmand or heavy drinker. And while this archer does indeed hold a bow in his left hand, in his right hand he holds a pipe (a *qalian*) with a Franciscan monk painted on the glass or ceramic base. Both paintings are classic, as were depictions of pairs of embracing lovers, or young boys and girls stretched out languidly in a meadow. Other works, by later followers, were merely sensual or even erotic. Another important painter was Muhammad

170. OPPOSITE LEFT. Riza 'Abbasi, *Young Man Dressed in Blue*, 1585. Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, inv. 1936.27.

171. OPPOSITE, RIGHT. Riza 'Abbasi, *The Archer Nashmi*, 1630. Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, inv. 1960–197. This portrait has such an ironic streak it is almost a caricature. The image of a Franciscan monk in the base of the pipe is probably another playful message.

Zaman, who worked during the last half of the seventeenth century and who was a leading figure during that period. He was under the spell of European art, and his work provides the basis for the study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iranian art, which is rooted in this past.

Something should be said about certain recurring themes in Persian painting. In the realm of mural painting,[113] with the exception of the *hammam*, or bathing establishments,[114] decorative writing, geometric motifs,[115] or arabesques long predominated. If, however, we focus on the texts, we can see how narrative epics (especially the *Shah-nama* by Firdawsi and the *Khamsa* by Nezami) surpassed all others, including scientific manuscripts or books with moralizing content (such as the *Khalia wa Dimna*). There were also explicitly religious texts, the most famous being the manuscript of *Mi'raj-nama* (the Ascension or Heavenly Journey of the Prophet). Within the Iranian context, however, it is more interesting to examine books with obviously Shiite

content. Oleg Grabar has written, "It is clear, with the single exception of the *Ascension of Muhammad*, Persian painting did not develop what one could call a sacred history in images, such as the Buddhist and Christian worlds did."[116] Miniatures with religious content existed during various periods and in various guises in Arab, Persian, Turkish, and Indian art.[117] But it is in the Safavid period that these themes underwent an interesting development,[118] particularly in relation to the evolution of religious dramas about the martyrdom of Hosayn (*ta'ziya*, literally "funerary sorrows"). A careful and detailed study of the subject, advanced about a decade ago by Maria Vittoria Fontana,[119] seems to clarify that while images (not only in miniatures) pertaining to a Shiite context certainly exist and are important and "curious" iconographically, they are not sufficiently significant to denote a particular school, place, or period.

FLOWERS OF WOOL
PERSIAN CARPETS

FRAGMENTS AND DOCUMENTS UNTIL THE LATE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

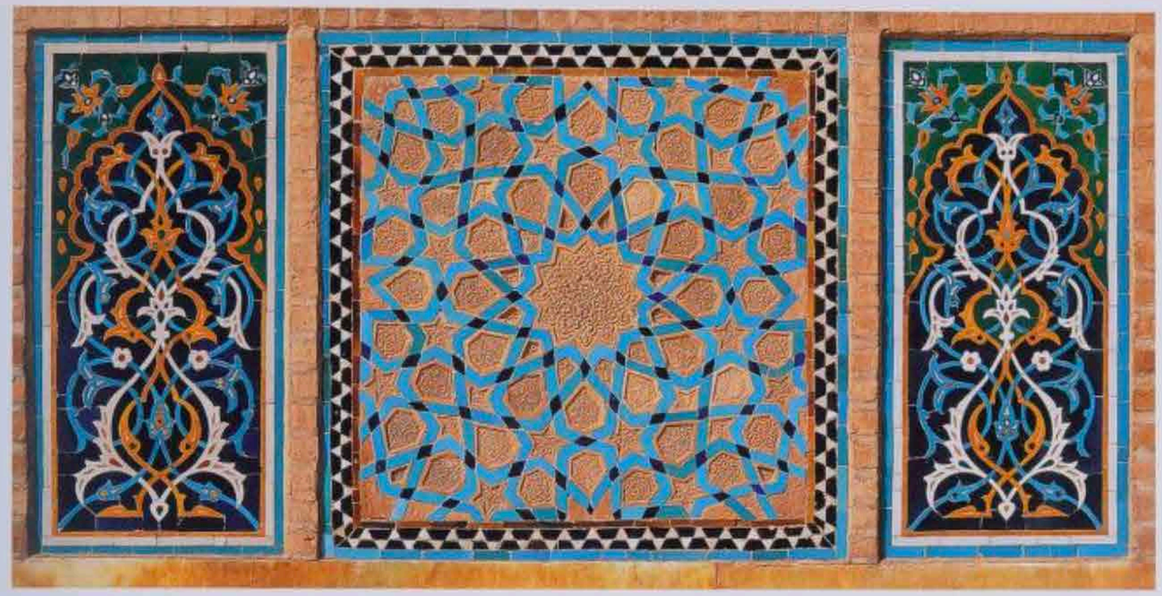
Textiles, particularly carpets, have great importance in Persian Islamic art. Even today in the collective imagination, the idea of luxury, splendor, and sumptuousness is associated with carpets, often described with the adjective "Persian." The very word evokes enchanted and distant worlds, extreme exoticism, and a temptation that is difficult to resist. We don't know where the history of Persian carpets begins, and the Iranian plateau could be one of the regions (like the Caucasus or central Asia) where this technique was developed. Both climate and important cultural reasons form the basis for this assumption. The carpet turns an everyday, undefined space into another realm, a space that is reserved, purified, and circumscribed for ritualistic reasons. The carpet can be an altar, and as such it responds to the compelling need to have a place where a priest—quite possibly a shaman,[1] a key figure in religious life in Asia, particularly among those Turkish and Mongol tribes that played such a large role in defining Iranian art—could fulfill his role "secure" from outside influences. This is the same security that each of us claims for our everyday living area, residence, or even tent. The idea of the tent is significant because of its nomadic dimension, and it represents an undeniable historical constant; indeed, it is canonized by the Koran as a tool of pilgrimage. Security and sacredness are specific to the carpet and are transferred to the building (more correctly, to a part of the building: the prayer hall), presenting a place for the community to gather: the mosque. The ground where the mosque is located is never sacred, but it becomes so as soon as floor coverings delimit the profane space—now trod upon by footwear—and set it apart from the area in the building assigned for religious function. Thus, it becomes clear that the entire mosque is not a place of worship, but only the part designated by a floor covering, which can vary, depending on climatic conditions. In Iran, with its harsh winters, covered and heated rooms are used, called *shabestan*, while in the summer an open-air prayer space, known as a *musalla*, is used.

Artistically the carpet looks like a mosaic made from wool. Shāpūr I (241–272), the great Sasanian king, had floor mosaics made by Roman prisoners in the new city he founded.[2] Muslim sovereigns, less inclined to a settled residence, used mosaics woven in wool and silk to embellish their tents and pavilions—an extremely ancient tradition. One of the most famous carpets mentioned in sources was the so-called "Spring of Khosrow,"[3] a work of extraordinarily

high quality, used to cover the floor of the *iwan* in Ctesiphon, home to the imperial residence. In fact, judging from descriptions, this was not a true carpet knotted in silk or wool, but rather a sort of woven mat that incorporated precious gems (emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and aquamarines) to simulate brooks, flowers, and plants that would never wither or dry out. This prodigious work was made in pieces, and fragments were taken off as booty by triumphant Arab armies in 642. The concept of the garden carpet, a clear allusion to paradise, is worthy of discussion, although it is not unique to Islamic tradition. Indeed, it reflects beliefs that go back much earlier, to Mesopotamian and Indian cultures, and Koranic descriptions represent a continuation of this earlier tradition.[6] This not only explains, in part, the predilection for floral imagery, but also constitutes a sort of link, an uninterrupted thread between the pre-Islamic past and the Arab conquest, one of those elements and motifs that surface—sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately—throughout Persian Islamic art.

We could easily fill these pages with literary quotes that mention numerous production centers where carpets w... knotted in ancient times,[5] but this would not make up for the absence of surviving carpets that can be attributed with certainty to periods prior to the sixteenth century. Among the most notable exceptions is a mat known as a *zilu*,[6] acquired in 1985 by the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and attributed by A. Ivanov, largely on the basis of inscriptions, to the fourteenth century.[7] Thus, apart from a small number of fragments, whose classification remains debatable, what we do know about carpets—excluding meager literary references—comes from secondary sources, such as miniatures, which provide scant knowledge of the earliest eras. The previous chapter addresses the reliability of miniatures as an iconographic source, and at this point there is an analysis of the principal decorative motifs. The research of A. Briggs on carpets in Timurid miniatures[8] is somewhat dated, although subsequent studies of other manuscripts and miniatures have resulted in significant modifications to her observations. In any case, it becomes clear how the typologies employed belong to a repertoire of geometric-based interlacings, with a broad use of simple figures—circles, squares, hexagons, octagons, stars, and crosses—intersected and superimposed in various ways. More markedly floral ornamentations are derived from and inspired by such geometric figurations. This can be confirmed by a fragment (25⅝ × 12 in. [65 × 30 cm]) now in the Benaki Museum in Athens, for which a fifteenth-century date has been suggested.[9] It is very likely that Persian carpets from the Seleucid to the Timurid period do not differ a great deal from Turkish carpets of that time, examples of which exist in the mosque of Ala ad-Din in Konya.[10] Works of this type have a repeated geometric motif, making even a large-scale carpet's execution rather simple, without requiring the aid of a preparatory drawing.

Italian painting from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries gives us some idea of the carpets that were popular at that time. Generally the context is a scene involving the Virgin Mary, with the carpet at her feet, reminding us of the sacred nature of the object, even in an utterly different sort of context.[11] Incidentally, despite the tremendous and universal fame of Persian carpets—for example, the Venetian ambassador, Josafat Barbaro, visiting Tabrīz in the second half of the fifteen century, expressed his enthusiasm for them[12]—they do not appear frequently in European painting until the very early seventeenth century (above all in Flemish works, where they often serve as backgrounds for sumptuous tables with still lifes). This coincided with increasing trade and the opening to the west encouraged by the Safavid sovereign Shah 'Abbas I (1587–1629). The geometric decorations on carpets appeared hand in hand



172. Detail of the decoration of the south *iwan* of the Congregational Mosque in Yazd

with contemporaneous architectural ornamentation. Beginning with the Il-Khanid period—actually as early as the late twelfth century, as the mausoleum of M'umina Khatun in Nakhchivan (1186) attests,[13] and more generally in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries—there was an increasing use of enameled ceramics in buildings. This is seen at the mosque in Natanz (1307–8),[14] but also at the mausoleum built by Oljeitu at Sultaniyya (1313/14–16),[15] and the practice evolved during the mid-fourteenth century, with the floral motifs employed at the mosque at Yazd (plate 172, c. 1375).[16] These geometric motifs correspond fairly closely to each other and suggest that if they did not have common models (the most likely candidate would be book arts, to which we will return shortly), at least there was a commonality of spirit. This is corroborated by the interior of the so-called blue mosque in Tabrīz (1465,[17] although the plan of that building is not very Persian), where the wall ornamentation harmonizes closely with the carpets, in this case Turkish.

SAFAVID INNOVATIONS

The Safavid era (1501–1722) brought what K. Erdmann, the most authoritative carpet scholar of the last century, has called a veritable revolution,[18] and fortunately sufficient examples survive to give us an idea of this historic production. The mechanism is quite simple, but ingenious: repeated geometric designs gradually disappear, to be replaced by a scheme with a centralized medallion and quarters of medallions in the corner pieces of the central area. It should be noted that the idea of the infinite possibility of repeated motifs is not abandoned, but rather the scale of the work is vastly expanded. A carpet at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Museum in Lisbon (208⅔ × 87⅖ in. [530 × 222 cm]), formerly in the imperial Hapsburg collections, is a superb example.[19] It is obvious that this is a transitional work, if one notes the size of the central medallion, which is disproportionately large compared to the rest of the field, just as the corner designs seem too small. In any case, the medallion is based on a central octagonal star with a floral background. The rest of the field of the carpet is covered by a lively series of plant shoots that terminate in half-palmette shapes, superimposed upon a geometric grid. The border design, which is often quite difficult to interpret in the absence of a measured preparatory

drawing, is discretely resolved, without symmetry or homogeneity, but through the change of direction of the two sides. While the design concept is experimental, the knotting technique is of the highest level, and the color palette is masterfully distributed, making this refined carpet a truly superior and imperial work. It was certainly an extremely rapid transitional phase. The celebrated carpet of the Dukes of Anhalt, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (26 ft. 6 in. × 7 ft. 3 in. [8.1 × 4.1 m]; warp in silk, weft in cotton, pile in wool with asymmetrical knotting),[20] is believed to have been part of the booty captured by the Turks during their unfortunate siege of Vienna (1683). Even with its central corner pieces missing, it still strikes a perfect balance between the ornate central medallion and the background. The latter has a vertiginous spiral motif on three different levels, against which vividly colored peacocks stand out; the border motif seems similar to that of the background field in the Lisbon carpet.

Perhaps the most celebrated carpet in the world, the so-called Ardabīl carpet,[21] consists of a pair of identical carpets, not an infrequent phenomenon. One was acquired in 1893, for the then considerable sum of 2,000 pounds sterling by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, with the money raised through a public financing campaign organized by William Morris. The other, which came to light in 1914, was used in part to restore its matching counterpart and is in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, California. It is signed and dated to year 946 of the Muslim era (1539–1540) and is quite large (34 ft. 6 in. × 18 ft. 2 in. [10.5 × 5.54 m]) and perfectly conceived and balanced in every part. According to tradition, these carpets came from the sanctuary of Shaykh al-Safi in Ardabīl,[22] although there are some doubts about this, since the impressive dimensions of the two pieces do not match the spaces of the mausoleum. It might be best to relate them to another great religious building, the tomb of Imam Reza in Mashhad. The central medallion has a polylobate shape, surrounded by sixteen ovals, two of which, along the vertical axis, contain two mosque lamps; the corner quarter of medallions are perfectly balanced. The background, which is an intense indigo blue, is studded with myriad floral buds supported by slender curving stalks. The well arranged border has an alternation of elongated scrolls and other polylobate shapes. The inscription reads:

> I have no refuge in the world except Your threshold
> There is no protection for my soul save this portico
> Work of the servant of the Holy Site Maqsud Kashani in the year 946.

The verses are by Hafiz, one of the Shīrāz's greatest poets. Unfortunately, we know nothing about the carpet's creator, but it was most likely only overseen by the Maqsud, who employed a large team of workers for at least three years. It is thought to have been made in Tabrīz, based on stylistic characteristics and because of that city's proximity to Ardabīl (or it might be attributed to a workshop in Kāshān, given the provenance of Maqsud). It was executed, at least in part, in accordance with a preparatory drawing measured off in millimeters. The persistent rolled ribbon motif (*chi-chi*), clearly Chinese in derivation, was seen as early as the Mongol era, but appears throughout the Islamic artistic repertoire of the Safavids until the time of the Ottomans; it is even present in work of the Mamluk era in Syria and Egypt.

Another masterpiece is in Milan, at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum (on loan from the Villa Reale in Monza).[23] This imperial carpet (plate 173), made in Tabrīz and dated (1542–43), featuring a central medallion and hunting scenes, is signed Giyath al-Din Jami (not the same Giyath who signed numerous textiles and worked in Yazd and Esfahān). Technically it is similar

173. Carpet with a hunt scene, from Tabrīz, 1542–43. Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan

to the Ardabīl carpet, with a silk warp, three cotton wefts (the example at the Victoria and Albert has a silk weft), and a wool pile, with asymmetrical knotting. Its considerable size (22 ft. 4. in. × 12 ft. [6.80 × 3.65 m]) makes it a serious candidate for the carpet meant to accommodate the sovereign's throne. In fact, each carpet has its own logic and mode of use, which can be understood only by sitting oneself at its center, which allows one to appreciate fully the decorative motifs from the proper distance. The Milan carpet has a sober, eight-lobed central medallion, with a scroll and pendants repeated in the corners and a flowered background against which figures of horsemen are engaged in a hunt. The carpet is symmetrical, along a central axis; the original preparatory drawing was one-quarter the size of the actual carpet and was rotated to achieve the desired effect. It is important to note how, even before Islam, the hunt theme was traditionally associated with royal power (for example, the marshland hunt scene at Taq-i Bustan). Thus, this carpet could be used by the Shah when resting after a long hunt.

Another carpet, which can be dated to the second half of the sixteenth century, also at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan (16 ft. 7 in. × 4 ft. 1 in. [5.07 × 2.27 m]),[24] belongs to an intermediary typology (plate 177). The warp and weft are in silk, and the pile is wool with silver brocade. At the center is a small polylobate medallion against a blue ground with flowers and birds. Against the red background of the main field, arranged symmetrically with relation to the center, are two vases, angelic figures, animals confronting each other (panthers, or more likely tigers), dragons beneath a tree who threaten a pair of birds, and fighting animals (a realistic lion that attacks a Chinese *chi-lin*)—all amid a riot of flowers and leaves supported by harmonious floral plant volutes (buds and leaves), arranged exuberantly and interspersed with various animals. The inner band between the border and the main field contains a long poetic inscrip-

tion (until now poorly translated), citing the "Darius of the time," a formula used only for the Shah. This was probably a carpet woven for Tahmasp, but it can also be linked to the so-called Sanguszko carpets, discussed below. There is a carpet in the Khalili Collection in London (97⅝ in. × 78 ⅜ in. [248 × 199 cm]), in wool with silver brocade,[25] with a large central medallion and quarter-medallions, rampant lions, floral motifs against an indigo blue background, and noteworthy for its ten elegantly inscribed bands between the border and the field. At the Berlin museums[26] is another large carpet (plate 174) with medallions and animals, from the second half of the sixteenth century (14 ft. × 88⅝ in. [427 × 225 cm]; warp and pile in wool, weft in cotton). The carpet has a dark blue ground for the medallion and border, an intense red field, and white central corners; the border iconography is unusual, with fish and ducks. The quality is excellent, although it does not reach the heights attained by some of the aforementioned examples. The carpet at the National Gallery of Art in Washington,[27] (14 ft. 4 in. × 11½ in. [437 × 225 cm]; wool pile on silk warp with wool and cotton weft) is more harmonious, and the medallion and animals against a ground with flowers and vines are completely integrated.

The so-called royal Swedish carpet is even more refined than the examples described above. With hunting scenes in silver-brocaded silk (18 ft. 2 in. × 9 ft. 4 in. [5.55 × 2.85 m]; royal collection, Stockholm, inv. N. 447),[28] it can be dated to the late sixteenth century. The ornamentation is simply perfect; the center is marked by an octagonal star-shaped medallion with a scroll and pendants, precisely replicated in the corners. The gorgeous, intense red field has bands of Chinese-style clouds (known as *chi-chi*), interspersed with hunters that stand amid their prey—lions, with other animals scattered about the field; there are also dragons and phoenixes. The border is equally sumptuous, and in this case, too, the only way to describe this carpet, which clearly has an imperial provenance, is as a masterpiece. Another sixteenth-century carpet is notable: the so-called "Chelsea" carpet, named for the London neighborhood where it was purchased from an antiquarian in 1890, by the Victoria and Albert[29] (18 ft. 4 in. × 10 ft. 4 in. [5.41 × 3.15 m]; silk warp and weft, asymmetrically knotted wool pile). The design is not based on a single central medallion, as in the cases discussed previously, but on a multiplicity of these (there are eight: two whole medallions, two half-medallions, and four quarter-medallions), staggered and connected to each other by ovals. The medallions have an intense indigo blue ground, against which the animals seem to move and the flowers blossom. This sort of design, with staggered and repeated diagonal motifs, also appears in a carpet now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (plate 180; a similar example is in Lyons),[30] in which the grid has alternating colors and the background fields have dragons and phoenixes facing off, an obvious reference to China. This is a classical scheme (formerly seen in Timurid art) perhaps documented by a miniature attributed to the great Bihzad and dated 1487–88.[31]

Kāshān, in central Persia—not far from Esfahān, the third Safavid capital after Tabrīz and Qazvin, famous for earthenware as well as carpets—produced carpets made entirely from silk. The precious nature of the materials employed (with silk one can obtain an extremely high density of knots, resulting in a miniaturist's clarity of detail, and produce colors that are also quite brilliant, particularly the yellow, made from costly saffron) and the quality of the drawing make this work the absolute zenith attained by this art form.

Under the Safavids the conceptual approach to the world of carpets changed, along with the idea of design. While they were once seen as objects of use, more or less the exclusive furnishing for many people, they now became works of art and were conceived and fabricated as

174. Carpet with animals and medallions, second half of the sixteenth century, Staatliche Museen, Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Islamische Kunst, inv. I 7/56

such. The consequences were incalculable. As for every work of art, in every part of the world, there are many different factors that contribute to the birth and development of a movement, and the nature of the client is undoubtedly extremely important. With the sixteenth century Persia experienced the rise of what we might call a national feeling, with a strong religious component.[32] The key figure during this period was probably the long-reigning Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–1576), an enigmatic personality. After a period of patronage, he underwent a mystical crisis that led him, during the final years of his reign, to become disinterested in the arts, but at this point the seeds had been sown, and the harvest would be reaped regardless. The centuries-long artisan tradition of carpet-making provided a solid foundation for an object that in the sixteenth century was held to be a perfect one, both technically and artistically.

The division of labor was quite important. The selection of wools and their carding preceded what was perhaps the most complex and specialized operation—the dyeing process. Whether wool or silk was used—and there were specific, very different colorants for each material—organic materials were generally employed, from the mineral and plant world, but also some from the animal world (after the discovery of the Americas, red obtained from cochineal insects was also imported to the East); the dyeing profession was handed down from generation to generation. If one compares fifteenth-century miniatures, more classical Turkish carpets (which are very similar to contemporaneous Persian examples), and older nomadic finds (the few surviving examples preceding the introduction of chemical colorants, around the end of the nineteenth century), there is an extraordinary increase in colors and tones during the Safavid era. This factor, often underestimated or even ignored, was decisive for providing the designer of preparatory drawings with a range of choices that was vast and no longer confined to two basic colors, red and blue. The silk carpet from Kāshān with hunting scenes, now in the Angewandte Kunst Museum in Vienna[33] (plate 175, 22 ft. 4 in. × 12 ft. 5⅝ in. [680 × 380 cm]), is striking in its splendor, and it will occur to even the most naive and distracted observer to compare it to a beautiful miniature. Indeed, one of the most illustrious masters of the time—Sultan Muhammad (see "Timeless Figures: Persian Miniatures")—is often credited with the preparatory drawing for this carpet, based on its stylistic features. This may seem logical, but some questions remain. The knotting technique is quite complex, and in a silk carpet with such dense knotting (over 800 knots per square inch), the possibilities for representation increase considerably. The knot does not have the same size horizontally and vertically (it is wider than it is tall, although one can adjust the weft, for example, to achieve more balance), frequently with the result of compression, due to the iron combs used to tighten the knots, and a distortion of the design. In other words, two plus two rarely equals four in carpets (that is, two horizontal knots and two vertical knots do not form a small square), and in order for the most intricate design to be transferred to measured paper (where one point equals one knot), the intervention of an expert is required, someone who functions in an intermediary role, between the designer and the knotter. Thus, the teamwork becomes highly specialized, with all the attendant implications, economically, socially, and artistically.

Two other carpet types should also be assigned to the sixteenth century. Made entirely from silk and more modest in size, they are exemplified by one in the Louvre[34] and another at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the Louvre carpet (plate 176, 43 × 48⅞ in. [109 × 124 cm]), the design is directional, that is, the carpet is meant to be viewed from one side. This is the first such instance we know of, and it is a type that would become extremely popular in India, as

175. Carpet with hunting scenes, from Kāshān, MAK—Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna. The preparatory drawing for this carpet, entirely in silk, is attributed to one of the greatest Islamic miniaturists from the Safavid era: Sultan Muhammad.

seen in the floral carpets from the Mughal era.[35] These feature animals, some imaginary and Chinese in origin, such as the mythical *chi-lin*, depicted individually or in combat with each other (the eternal theme of the lion or panther that attacks an ox or a gazelle), against a Chinese background of rocks and flowers. The Metropolitan Museum of Art carpet (96⅜ × 66⅛ in. [245 × 168 cm]; inv. N. 14.40.715) features a central four-lobed medallion against a refined floral ground. Both works have similarities with book arts in general and bindings in particular.[36] It is useful to compare the carpet with animals to lacquered covers such as the one in the Keir Collection in London, signed "Rida" and dated 1612.[37] The same can be said of the Metropolitan Museum of Art carpet, which follows a scheme that was widely used for engraved and gilded leather bindings, a design that would also be revived for book cover plates in the Italian Renaissance.[38]

This leads us to the theory that the development of carpet design was inspired and supervised by court workshops that created illuminated manuscripts, an art form that was held in high esteem by the sovereigns. It is a convincing hypothesis for small-scale carpets, but it seems less convincing in terms of larger scale works, made for an imperial patron or for the court, where we should not underestimate the possible link to architectural decoration (ceramic mosaics, but also painting, although scarce traces of the latter have survived). While the artistic milieu was the same, and the artists would have worked under the supervision of trained workers when they were not employed by the Shah, a degree of autonomy was granted to artists in the *naqqashkhana* (the house of design). Large carpets, conceived for prayer halls in a mosque or a palace (in this case scenes with animals or hunts would be appropriate) probably were intended as an accompaniment to the walls or domes. A carpet that was formerly in the collection of Prince Roman Sanguszko in Paris[39] (21 ft. × 10 ft. 6¼ in. [6.40 × 3.22 m]) fits this description and is only one example of some important artifacts (plates 178–79). It is made from

176. LEFT. Carpet with decoration of animals, from Kāshān, sixteenth century, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. n. 6741

wool (executed in Kermān, using the "vase" technique, described below), with a complex decorative layout (symmetrical on a central axis), that seems like a compendium of all the styles in fashion in the sixteenth century: a central medallion and quarter-medallions, with hunting scenes, animals in combat, and a floral ground. The central medallion, which is oval and subtly polylobate, has a central diamond shape with fighting animals and two pairs of elongated ovals with, respectively, pairs of standing angel figures and seated musicians separated by a cypress tree, while the rest of the space is filled with intersecting arched ribbons. The scroll below has two seated lute players, and the pendant shape has figures of angels, also seated. In each of the corner shapes around the center, which are wider than the quarter-medallions, there are three hunters on horseback; at the center of the scroll, there is a half lotus flower with a small fish, and there is a peacock at the center of the pendant shape. The rest of the field is an indigo blue, covered with minute designs of plant vines with flowering buds, individual animals, and pairs of animals (imaginary, Chinese-influenced, and others) in combat. Two pairs of blue gazelles that face each other are not a unique motif, for they also appear on a carpet with animal motifs at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum.[40] The border is equally magnificent. In the corners there are small medallions with animals in combat, and at the center there is a medallion

177. ABOVE, RIGHT. Carpet, from Kāshān, Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, inv. 424

178–179. PAGE 228. Overall view and detail of a carpet with medallions and animals, from the collection of Prince Roman Sanguszko, Miho Museum, Tokyo, 16th–17th century. The corner motifs in the central section are very similar to ceramics above the arches at the caravansary of Ganj 'Ali Khan in Kermān

180. PAGE 229. Carpet, Musée des Tissus, Lyons, inv. 25423. The decorative grid of this carpet is particularly complex. The clashing dragons and phoenixes are a motif from the Far East, of Mongol derivation, at this point assimilated into the Islamic repertoire.

with two standing figures, one of which is winged; these lie against a red ground where dragons and phoenixes, both Chinese in derivation, face off. This long description is justified by the fact that this is a masterpiece, with no exaggeration or abuse of the term. The carpet was clearly executed in Kermān, as technical analysis confirms. In that city—in the main square, which in a certain sense anticipates the grand royal plaza in Esfahān—there is a monument, a caravansary,[41] dated 1598, that was built by the governor Ganj 'Ali Khan beginning in 1596. He was an intimate friend, follower, and ally of Shah 'Abbas, and the architectural decorations in ceramic mosaic and tile are perfectly integrated with the carpet. Gang 'Ali Khan had spent a long period of time in eastern Iran (Khorāsān), and there is a persistent tradition, in part supported by archaeological findings, according to which the local blue-and-white ceramic production (inspired by the Far East) was brought to Kermān via the immigration of three hundred Chinese ceramists,[42] which would bring things full circle.

The "vase" technique at Kermān was first identified and described by May Beattie,[43] who observed how in these carpets (floral, where the design may or may not have a vase, from which the name derives), a thread of the warp is raised and almost superimposed upon the contiguous thread, thereby allowing a very dense wool knotting (with a considerable expenditure of

material and therefore resulting in a very solid, heavy, and costly end product), with a compact and velvety pile surface. It is interesting to note how the decorative scheme—based on staggered floral diamond shapes—but not the technique, was used in the seventeenth century in northwestern Persia and in the Caucasus.

181. Silk carpet, brocaded in silver, sent as a gift to Venice by Shah 'Abbas I in 1603. Basilica of San Marco, Venice, inv. n. 26

Even a concise history of Safavid carpets must mention Shah 'Abbas I. This brilliant sovereign encouraged the continuity and full evolution of work undertaken by his predecessors, and he elevated carpet-making to the level of industry. The development of the arts and commerce, with international implications, was part of his political and economic program, attested to by the fine carpets that he sent as a diplomatic gift to Venice in the early seventeenth century (1603).[44] These were silk carpets, brocaded in silver (made on looms in Kāshān and Esfahān), and standard in size (137¾ in. × 70⅞ in. [250 × 180 cm]), with delicate floral motifs, although with certain decorative incongruities, typical of an art form that was not yet completely codified (plate 181). These appealed to the imaginations of the recipients.[45] *Kilims* (or *gelims* or *ghilims*), flat textiles without pile (which Europeans undoubtedly thought were eastern tapestries), were

182. Velvet brocade, Civico Correr Museum, Venice, inv. Cl. xxii, n. 37. This is a work with a Christian subject (perhaps a variant of the Virgin and Child), a motif that was not foreign to Safavid Persian culture at the time of Shah 'Abbas I.

respected and treated like works of art, too. One carpet that is particularly noteworthy is made from silver-brocaded silk, with the coat of arms of Sigismund III Vasa, King of Poland, in the center.[46] It was commissioned and imported by an Armenian merchant (the insertion of the coat of arms increased the cost by five crowns) and is now in Munich, at the Residenz Museum (96⅞ × 53⅛ in. [246 × 135 cm]; inv. WC3). Another silk "tapestry" brocaded in silver is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art;[47] the central medallion, which is oval and polylobate (with a scroll and pendants), contains a horseman confronting a mighty dragon, while the background field has individual animals, animals in combat, and flowers. In the corners around the central quarter-medallion is a renowned depiction of Laila and Majnun, from a work by Nezami, which was also a popular theme in textiles from Yazd signed by the master Ghiyath. A well-known artist who is thought to have also been active in Esfahān, Ghiyath was in the service of Shah 'Abbas, teaching him the techniques and secrets of weaving (plate 182).

In 1878 at the Polish Pavilion of the World's Fair in Paris, some carpets belonging to the noble Czartoryski family were exhibited. Although the carpets are Persian in origin, the term "Polish carpet" (or "polonaise") entered carpet literature. Rather small in size (about 80 × 60 in.

[200 × 150 cm]), with silk pile, these carpets have sumptuous floral decorations, some with medallions, and a selection of extremely pleasing color combinations. Many specialists consider these to be among the most beautiful carpets ever produced, although at times they have a hint of self-satisfaction, making them feel a bit affected. A large "Polish carpet" in silk (with a cotton weft; 190 × 86⅝ in. [483 × 215 cm]) is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[48] Much more complex and ornate than the carpet given as a gift to the city of Venice, it has a sort of central diamond shape (with a European noble coat of arms) and a field with lively floral forms; it is dated to the mid-seventeenth century, when workshops were at the height of their carpet-producing activity. A silver-brocaded carpet (90⅞ × 65¾ in. [231 × 167 cm]; inv. VT-1045), formerly in the collection of Baron Stieglitz and now at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, can be described as "strange" by virtue of the asymmetry of the field design, which has octagonal (or modified square) medallions with floral backgrounds, connected to rectangular scrolls (these too have four additional points) and small, quadrilobate circular medallions. This carpet, which has a classical floral border, has a fragmentary, repetitive, and decentralized design. Other small format, classic, silk "Polish carpets" (undoubtedly produced in series, using the highest quality techniques) can be found in the Cleveland Museum of Art[49] and the collection of the Dukes of Buccleuch and Queensberry,[50] which, with other examples, document the considerable production capacity for carpets in Persia during the seventeenth century.

Having reached its apogee between the late sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century, Safavid society and art entered a period of decline, which ended in 1722 with another invasion from the east, this time by Afghan tribes. In the mid-eighteenth century an important figure emerged, Nadir Shah,[51] a tribal leader of Khorasanic origin, who promoted military campaigns from India (see the next chapter "Persia from the Baroque to the Neoclassical Eras") to the Caucasus. He brought to Iran the "Peacock Throne," but also many skilled artisans, who were active in several fields of the arts. There was continuous back and forth pillaging and fighting that greatly disrupted the social fabric and also brought about profound changes in the production of carpets (techniques and designs were passed from one part of the country to another, in the wake of more or less forced migrations). From the nineteenth century on, carpet production would also be strongly influenced by European tastes and requirements.[52]

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

This chapter, which is only a rapid excursus into a fascinating and complex world, cannot be considered complete without at least mentioning the symbolism of the motifs that appear in carpets, an intricate and nonlinear subject. Floral designs are the easiest motif to trace. Beginning with the more or less mythical "Spring of Khosrow," the idea of the flower and the garden becomes a preponderant and permanent feature of carpets. The importance of green spaces, whether planted or not (easily summarized by the term *bustan*, or garden, which can refer to a meadow, park, garden, orchard, or forest), goes back to the beginning of time and is consciously understood as a reference to paradise (or *paradeisos*) and the mythical garden of Eden.[53]

There have always been flowering gardens, from ancient India to our own time. Islamic culture was no exception, and the Koran has an idealized image of the four-part garden (the Persian *chahar-bagh*), to define the Paradise of the Just, with four rivers (milk, honey, wine, and water), fruit trees, the darkest green, clusters of grapes (misunderstood as the *huri*, the ever-virgin creatures), and finally cushions and carpets, upon which one could rest and contemplate eternity.[54]

This scheme would have tremendous significance for the city planning of Esfahān, but also for the grand mausoleums in India, such as Humayun (conceived by a Persian architect), Akbar, I'timad ad-Dawla, or the Taj Mahal, not to mention the gigantic *baghs*, or gardens, built at the behest of the Mughal sultans in Kabul, but also and above all in Kashmir. The theme of flowers, connected to the idea of paradise, has always been central to the Islamic artistic experience, whether one thinks of the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem or those of the great mosque in Damascus; and vegetation in its infinite forms has inspired and been reproduced in the arts, from Spain to China. Polychrome flowers and veritable four-part garden carpets, such as those from the nineteenth century (which undoubtedly imitate more ancient examples), are traditionally assigned to the region of Kurdistan in northwestern Iran.[55]

Probably no earlier than the late seventeenth century, the *boteh* motif,[56] an almond shape with the end delicately folded back on itself, became widely disseminated in Persia (principally in carpets, but also in fabrics and then in architectural decoration in enameled brick). This may have been inspired by the cypress, an evergreen that was much loved throughout the east and particularly venerated in Iran (it is associated with Zoroastrianism, but also with the worship of various famous local saints). This motif was extremely popular, not only in Persia and in carpets, but also further east, in India, where it was used in the field or borders of shawls,[57] finally ending its evolution in the west (as *paisley*),[58] where it has been reinterpreted by fashionable designers for foulards and ties.

For long periods the field of carpets was dominated by repeated geometric designs. In addition to practical reasons, tied to facility of execution, these motifs meshed well with Islamic beliefs, which saw in the flow of ornamentation a continuum, proof of infinite divine creation. Once again, the Turkish example is helpful, where these emblems, perhaps totemic schematizations linked to tribal designs, are called *gül* (flower) in Turkish (the flower par excellence being the rose).[59] Safavid carpets are different in that, in addition to a substantial change in layout, they have a different decorative philosophy, linked above all to a presumed Sufi (or mystic) influence[60] in the development of decorative designs. S. van Cammann[61] is mainly responsible for this interpretation. Part of this scholar's analysis is well reasoned and detailed. For example, the Ardabil carpet is interpreted, in part on the basis of the verses in its inscription, as a means of access to the heavenly spheres, and the hanging lamps in the medallion immediately evoke the celebrated "Sura of the Light" [XXIV] and verse 35. However, van Cammann's analysis seems somewhat distorted by its origins. Before becoming engrossed in eastern carpets, van Cammann was an erudite interpreter of Chinese art (particularly textiles, to which he dedicated at least one masterful essay),[62] and he has adopted the same investigative methods, transferring them to the reality of Islamic mysticism, finding in particular support in Persian poetry. In fact, the latter is strongly symbolic (see the extraordinary interpretation that A. Bausani gave to a celebrated work by Hafiz),[63] and is also connoted by enormous ambiguity. There is a celebration of young boys, even more than young girls, with their curls, beauty spots, coral lips, and perfect pearly teeth, in a passionate love song of the nightingale for its beloved rose (beautiful, but haughty and indifferent), which will pierce the heart with its thorn. There is a constant suspension between sacred and profane love, which is not to negate that a certain symbolism is concealed within the carpet designs, and indeed, in certain circumstances, such influences are clearly present,[64] but these are circumscribed examples that are quite recognizable. We should simply be wary of facile interpretations, the results of a low-level exoticism that carpet mer-

chants have used to market the "mysteries" of the East and to build considerable fortunes for themselves, whereby everything relates to a mystical symbolism with Sufi origins.

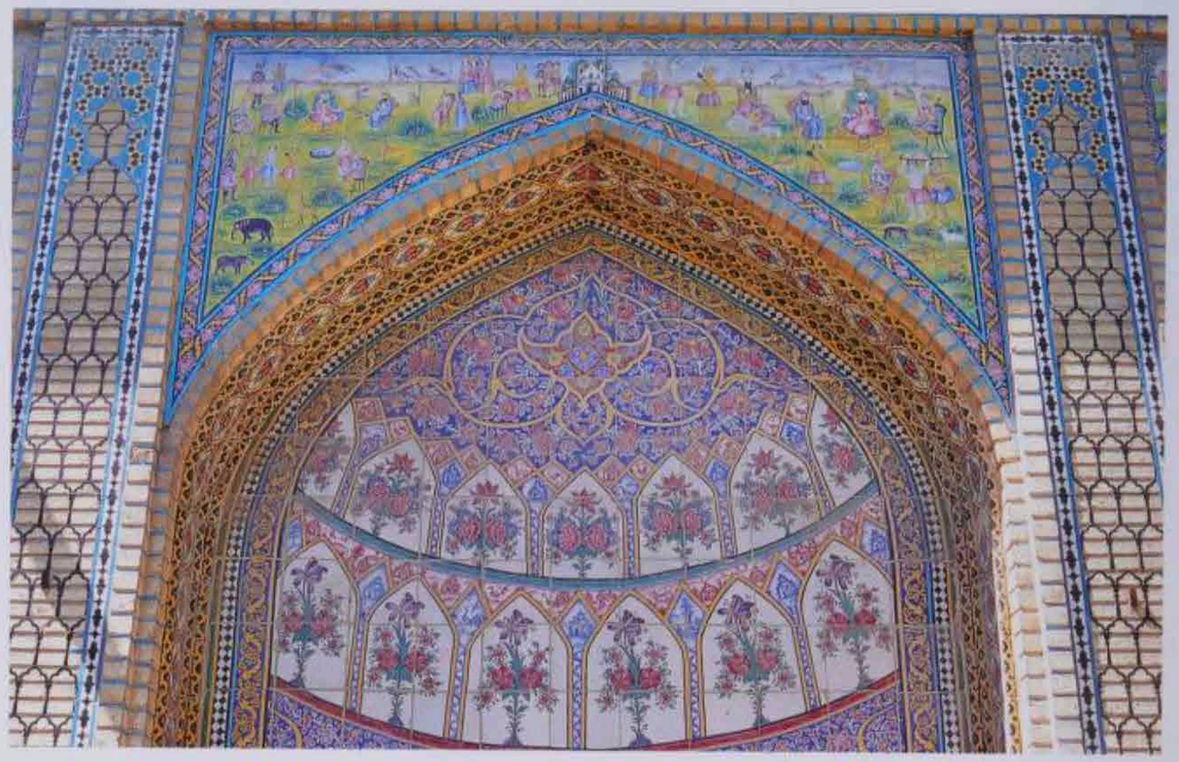
The hunt, for example, is a motif that legitimizes power and the laic pleasures of court life (along with dances and banquets), of which we find solid evidence in the pre-Islamic period, in Persia and elsewhere, and which enjoyed formidable historical continuity. Clashes and combat between animals[65] is a simpler and more transparent example, and one that also has a long history, tied to classical symbolism of the male solar principle (the predator animal, above all the lion, but also the eagle, panther, or cheetah, which is in turn defeated by the sovereign, who hunts it down and thus ascends to a higher level). The predator/solar principle overcomes the lunar principle (the prey is almost always an ox or a gazelle with horns, signifying the crescent moon), in this case understood to be negative. A Chinese influence is also obvious on an iconographic level when a dragon attacks a phoenix, which represents a reversal of value, since the dragon in Iran became a creature of the underworld, while the bird, which also has an extremely long and glorious history, acquired solar and positive connotations. But in this case, too, it is often the hero that gains legitimacy by striking the monstrous creature (never really killing it, for there are never images of dragon corpses). In the Far East, there is a face-off, a balance, and an equilibrium, where the *yang* (male) and the *yin* (female) must coexist in perfect harmony.

And so is there no clear symbolism? In reality, there is something more or less constant and verifiable, in the most popular products, such as the *kilims*, but also in many of the carpets that come from looms in towns and villages less touched by the carpet's evolution from object of use to work of art. We have already spoken of the sacred nature of space in carpets. In this sense the borders, as van Cammann has rightly stressed, represent a sort of limit or confine, a "door" that leads to another dimension. All this works as a defense, particularly against the *jinns* ("genies," benign or malign sprites, often mentioned in the Koran), which, for reasons that cannot be analyzed here,[66] are repelled by sharp points or acute angles. Curiously this protection against the *jinns* is the explanation that Gonbad-i Qabus gave to justify the characteristic and unique exterior shape of his celebrated mausoleum. And so in the borders of many carpets we find zigzag or broken lines; indeed one might hypothesize that floral motifs and sinuous lines (often referred to as "in-and-out" design in specialized literature) also respond to this logic, which is rarely understood today.

PERSIA BETWEEN THE BAROQUE AND THE NEOCLASSICAL ERAS

After the Afghan invasion of 1722 the country experienced a period of great turbulence, marked by the rise of a remarkable figure, Nadir Shah Afshar, who was born in 1688 in a small village north of Mashhad and who reigned from 1737 to 1747. A leading commander,[1] he defeated the Indian Muhammad Shah and brought back from Delhi an enormous amount of booty, including the famous Peacock Throne and the *koh-i-nur* ("mountain of light") diamond. Above all, however, he compelled a large number of Indian artisans and artists to migrate to Iran. This was a decisive factor in the subsequent development of Persian art because a phenomenon of great interest had occurred in India. Persian artists, particularly miniaturists, had been attached to the court of Tabrīz with Humayun, as discussed on page 212. Emperors such as Jahangir (r. 1605–27) and Shah Jahan (r. 1628–57) were very aware of European culture, which arrived via splendid English herbariums, popular prints brought in by the Jesuits, and other sources, and which was quickly assimilated.[2] It was this European culture, filtered through the strikingly Eastern taste of India, that influenced Nadir Shah in the construction of his palace at Kalat-i Nadiri (plate 184). Its influence is evident from the palace exterior, which has an octagonal base, a "pumpkin-fluted" drum (which has now lost its roofing), and extremely beautiful reliefs to which we have applied the term "baroque," though certainly not in a derogatory sense.[3] The interior paintings, in contrast, are in line with Safavid output, seen in the pavilion of 'Ali Qapu at Esfahān. This is not to deny that European influence had already reached Persia in the seventeenth century. We wish merely to point out that decorative links can be more complicated than they appear at first glance. This movement would be particularly strong in southern Persia, specifically at Shīrāz, with the Zand dynasty (1750–94), founded by Muhammad Karim Khan, and would be a necessary precursor to the Qajar period (1799–1923).

From an architectural point of view, the Zand and Qajar periods did not contribute significant planimetric innovations. The mosque continued to have four axial *iwans*, with the *qibli* preceding a cupola. The most important monument is the Masgid-i Vakil in Shīrāz (1750–79; the mosque was restored in 1825), the work of Karim Khan.[4] Built of salmon-pink stone, it is specifically reminiscent of India because of its twisted tree-trunk columns supporting acanthus-leaf capitals. The mosque has only two *iwans*, and the walls and arches are decorated with



183. Detail of the decoration of the pavilion of Karim Khan Zand in Shiraz, eighteenth century

184. The palace of Kalat-i Nadiri, commissioned by Nadir Shah and built in his native country, eighteenth century

extremely beautiful tiles (plate 183) in an exuberant floral pattern dominated by the color pink. The representation of the flowers is quasi-naturalistic, and it may have served as a source of inspiration for the millefleur pattern in contemporary carpets.

The Nasir al-Molk mosque in Shīrāz, built between 1889 and 1890 by the architect Muhammad Hasan (plate 185), was inspired by the Vakil mosque. The vault, intrados, and small domes contain enameled bricks, recalling Seljuk Turkish ornamentation and the early Il-Khanid period. The Masgid-i Meidan of Kāshān,[5] although established much earlier, has a series of very interesting later additions, including the novelty of a two-level courtyard. The lower portion (which houses a water basin) is ten feet (3 m) below walkway level, which creates a very striking effect. Also noteworthy are the ceramic wall facings, of a type thereafter used only for tiles, with their effective range of colors, where the extensive use of deep yellow and pink is particularly appealing.

The most prolific client for architecture in the Qajar era was Fath 'Ali Shah (b. 1771, r. 1797–1834), who built large mosques in Qazvin, Burejird, Zanjan, and Tehran, the capital of the dynasty. The Qajars were also actively engaged in projects for the "embellishment," expansion, and reconstruction of the mosques, particularly in the "holy" cities of Qom and Mashhad, where the domes of the large sanctuaries were covered with gold-plated brick. Needless to say, large-scale projects, already in existence under the Safavids, for example in the Masgid-i Shah of Esfahan, were not abandoned. One distinctive feature was the accentuation of the bulbous shape of the dome, somewhat reminiscent of Indian work. One characteristic of this phase is the use of polychrome tile roofing, achieved with the *cuerda seca* (fireclay tile) technique,[6] already used by the Timurids (for example, at Herāt in the mausoleum of Gawhar Shad); it was also used by the Safavids in the Hasht Bihisht in Esfahān, and in beautiful and unusual wall facings with depictions of angels in the New Julfa cathedral in Esfahān.[7] This technique enjoyed particular success during the Qajar period.[8]

One of the freshest and most original creations (and also the most amusing, because of its incongruous use of Eastern themes reworked in a European key) is the pavilion of Karim Khan Zand in Shīrāz (mid-eighteenth century), with its classic motifs of the royal hunt, a subject that frequently appears in Persian art. But its architecture and landscapes are Western in inspiration, as are the faces (the men almost always have beards and broad moustaches, oval eyes no longer elongated as in the older, central Asian tradition, thick eyebrows, and long hair curled at the nape), which are all purely eighteenth century in appearance.

One of the best preserved buildings in Shīrāz is the Naranjestan ("Orangerie"), the patrician residence of the Qavam family. Built by Mirza Ibrahim Khan between 1870 and 1880, at the height of the Qajar period, it is a good example of civic architecture with related foreign influences (including Russian, a reflection of the political realities of the time). From an entrance pavilion with an interior lining of vivid ceramic tiles, the visitor enters a beautiful garden (customary in all traditional Persian houses, large or small), with orange trees and other fragrant plants, including roses. Of particular interest among the exterior panels are several high-relief stone slabs decorated with neo-Achaemenid molded scenes (plate 187), visibly inspired by examples in nearby Persepolis, a neoclassical mode followed throughout Persia of which very few traces remain today. The two-story gallery of the house provides a large space for reception rooms, but the most evocative area is the entrance portico with its columns and "mirror mosaic" ceiling, inspired by the work of Chihil Sutun, evidence of a taste that had become decidedly more gaudy. Mirrors as a decorative element for architecture, along with stucco, henceforth completely Europeanized in terms of technique and motifs, appear frequently. Shīrāz has the sanctuary (open also to non-Muslims) of Shah Cheragh ("Sovereign of Light"), the principal place of pilgrimage in the south, and the tomb of Sayyid Amir Ahmad, brother of the eighth Shiite Imam, 'Ali al-Rida, who is buried in the complex of the same name in Mashhad. A sanctuary in the traditional architectural style, it has thousands of tiny mirrors that

reflect the sunlight with an effect that is far from sober. Mirror decoration of this type is consistently found in the most important sanctuaries of Iran, including those of the Imam Reza in Mashhad and Hazrat-i Ma'sume, sister of the Imam of Qom, who died en route to a visit to the Imam Reza. It also appears in less famous places, for example in the nineteenth-century Imamzada Shahzada Ibrahim in Kāshān. Mirror mosaics appear in civic architecture as well. In the Kharrazi building in Esfahān there are also polychrome glass partitions and stuccoes. The Nasir al-Molk building in Shirāz (1883) is decorated chiefly with large glass panels and stuccowork, as well as mirrors, combined with paintings of flowers. The combination of the three elements (glass, stucco, and mirrors) also appears in the decoration of the Husainiyya[9] Amini of Qazvin (1873–78),[10] which is divided into three large rooms around a central courtyard.

The nineteenth century witnessed the spread of the *ta'ziya*, the Shiite religious dramas[11] that hinged on the sacrifice of Husain and his family in Karbala. Spaces appropriate for plays of this type were built in the large cities. They include the Takiyya Mo'aven al-Molk in Kermānshah (northwest Iran), which is divided into three parts, each devoted to a phase of the Karbala tragedy. The first, the 'Abbasiyya, was a courtyard with walls faced with polychrome tiles[12] that depict the dramatic events related to Hazrat 'Abbas, younger brother of Husain. The Husainiyya is named for the Imam who was the son of 'Ali (and grandson of Muhammad). It consists of a domed area connected to several rooms referred to as the Zainabiyya (from Zainab, sister of Husain). The courtyard of the Abbasiyaya has interesting wall paintings with figures of dervishes, with their customary long hair and other attributes, such as the *qashqul*, the begging bowl, an object of extremely ancient tradition.[13]

It has been said that one characteristic of Qajar architecture was its polychrome tile wall decorations. In Kermān the *madrasah* of Ibrahim Khan (a cousin and son-in-law of Fath 'Ali Shah) can be dated to 1816–17. It has tile panels done in the *cuerda seca* technique, with vases and blossoms (particularly roses), as well as the angel from the sacrifice of Abraham, executed in warm colors of yellow, green, pink, and white. The polychrome tile decoration of the neighboring *hammam* is also noteworthy; it has an explosion of white and yellow flowers with turquoise leaves against a dark background, in addition to ducklings facing each other and birds depicted back to back. The entrance to the *hammam*, on the large seventeenth-century square (near the bazaar) has interesting pictorial decorations[14] on the outside of the entrance niche.

Shīrāz is also the site of the Bagh-i Iram, a splendid park in the northern part of the city created by Muhammad Qoli Khan Ilkhani, a chieftain of the semi-nomadic group known as the Qashqa'i. He turned it into a large, evocative space with streams and various species of exotic and ordinary plants, including many cypress trees. Some eighty years later the aforementioned architect Muhammad Hasan was commissioned by Nasir al-Molk to build a large tripartite pavilion on several floors, complete with a water piping system that ran through the ground floor and helped to cool the building. The roofs feature fanlights decorated with very vivid tiles, depicting hunting scenes and animals in combat. The colors are combined in a tasteful and striking manner. Another noteworthy object in Shīrāz is the ceramic panel of the Husainiyya Mushir, which portrays a religious subject.[15]

Tehran, the new capital established in 1788 by Agha Muhammad Khan, was obviously at the center of the architectural developments of the new dynasty. The most representative building was the Golestan ("Roseraie") in the citadel, now in the northern district of the city. According to traditional Persian custom, the complex was built in a park with large plantains, cypresses,

185. Detail of the *iwan* of the Nasir al-Molk mosque in Shirāz, late nineteenth century

186. Figures by Fath 'Ali Shah in the Taq-i Bustan cave, early nineteenth century

and pines. The *talar*, or exterior portico, is supported by two twisted columns made of stone from Shīrāz, as is the large marble throne brought from the palace of Karim Khan Zand, which was used for public audiences and for the principal festivals such as *nouruz*, the Persian New Year in spring. The ceiling is mirrored, and the walls are still decorated with mirrors and oil paintings of the Qājar rulers. Nasir al-Din Shah (r. 1867–92) greatly restored and expanded this royal palace. During this period polychrome tile decoration was extended to a large part of the pavilions,[16] with a variety of subjects, including scenes from everyday military life. More work was done on the Golestan at the beginning of the twentieth century (the period of Muzaffar al-Din Shah, 1896–1907), including a series of two-tone white and black tiles (1899), clearly inspired by photography, with neoclassical subjects, such as portraits of Parthian and Sasanian rulers adopted from antique coins. Another important achievement was the Sultanabad palace. Naturally, the fashion of these neoclassical structures (with one eye on the Persian past and one on certain aspects of European architecture, particularly Russian) was followed in many palaces of courtiers and the nobility.

The typology of the noble house is exemplified by the home of the Burujerdi family of Kāshān.[17] It has a lovely central garden with a large fountain, an entryway, two wings with various rooms (including servants' quarters), and a very beautiful reception room with an ingenious domed roof, reminiscent of the vaults of Amin al-Dawla's Timche in the Kāshān bazaar. The stuccoes depicting Cossack soldiers, hunters, and other representations taken from "the classics" are decidedly individual but not exceptional in comparison to contemporary artistic developments in Tehran. The persistence of these decorative typologies, particularly in stucco, can be seen in a strange early twentieth-century building, the fort of Bandar Tahiri, located

187. Bearers of offerings, detail of the bas-relief decoration in the pavilion of Karim Khan Zand in Shīrāz

in the extreme south of the country, not far from Siraf.[18] At least twenty stucco panels depict episodes from the great age of the *Shah-nama*, including a portrayal of Mahmud of Ghazna (998–1030) enthroned.

We have already alluded to the long reign Fath 'Ali Shah (1797–1834), characterized by particularly intense building activity. He also encouraged and patronized an increasingly visible interest in the European arts, on the one hand, and neoclassical taste, on the other. An impressive example of the latter is the idea of sculpting portraits in stone, seen in the Taq-i Bustan cave, one of the principal sites of Sasanian art. The Shah had his own effigy sculpted on the right wall (plate 186), above a beautiful wild boar hunting scene in the marshes. He is shown enthroned, with attendants and celebratory inscriptions. Fortunately, he was not as presumptuous as a well-known Egyptian, Ramses, who imposed his own features on depictions of many of his illustrious forebears. The fact that this was not an isolated case is confirmed by the sculpture of the same ruler on the rock above the Cheshme-i 'Ali ("Spring of 'Ali"), in the environs of Rayy, today a southern suburb of Tehran. Once a flourishing city, it was destroyed by the Mongol invasions and never truly recovered from the devastation. It is a picturesque site where carpets are washed and then spread out to dry on the surrounding rocks. Fath 'Ali Shah, easily identifiable by his very long beard (although the letters of his name are not clear), is accompanied by an attendant carrying an imperial parasol, like an Achaemenid soldier, except that the hairstyle is typical of the nineteenth century and he has a hunting hawk on his right arm.

There are also several famous oil portraits (on wood or canvas) of Fath 'Ali Shah, such as the portrait by the court artist Mihr 'Ali, now in the Nigaristan Museum in Tehran.[19] The use of a

purely Western technique in these portraits is evidence of the new Persian artistic trends between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. However, the phenomenon itself is not new and can be fully documented in a brief backward glance. The European fashion had already gained a foothold in the second half of the seventeenth century and took root decisively in Iran, a necessary precondition for the phase we are now examining. The most noteworthy artist in this context is Muhammad Zaman,[20] who has been credited as having spent time in Italy and is believed to have converted to Christianity. He left a major series of works executed using Western techniques and depicting Western subjects, including *Sacrifice of Abraham* (1684–85), *Descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ, Mary, and Joseph* (1682–83), and *Venus and Cupid* (1676–77),[21] in which a plausible synthesis of West and East is achieved with a sure hand. Mention must also be made of the large pictures of historical subjects, dating from the second half of the seventeenth century, that decorate the palaces of Esfahān. A work entitled *Shah Tahmasp of Persia Receiving Humayun Pasha of India*[22] on the west wall of the audience room is by Chihil Sutun, although it was subsequently retouched. This work is fascinating as it combines European subjects, such as the landscape visible through the window between the two rulers, and Indian typology, in homage to the visitor. Other interesting touches include the large moustaches of the Persian dignitaries and officials (which later would became a permanent feature of such art), as well as the dancers in the foreground, a subject already seen at Samarra, but now treated with a vivacity and a movement that will make it a favorite subject for painters in later centuries.

The European breeze of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to become a steady wind in the nineteenth, a period that produced the striking personality of Abu'l Hasan Ghaffari, a native of Kāshān[23] and perhaps the most talented of the Qajar court painters. Definitely a "painter laureate," with a penchant for still lifes, he was sent by Muhammad Shah (1834–1848) to study in Italy. In addition to numerous large oil paintings and frescoes, such as those of the Nigaristan Palace,[24] two new types of works appeared: paintings on papier-mâché and polychrome enamels on metal. Strictly speaking, the former was not a novelty (painting on a layer of transparent varnish or lacquer had already been practiced in the classical Safavid period), but the technique became widely disseminated. It was applied not only to the covers of manuscripts, but also to mirrors, boxes, penholders, and various objects, in thousands of examples, with subjects ranging from portraits to flowers (which were extremely popular) to classic subjects of miniatures, including episodes from the *Shah-nama*, views of cities, historical events, and even imitation postage stamps.[25]

Cloisonné enamels are more closely linked to Europe (but admittedly also to China, which has a solid tradition in this field); until the nineteenth century these were not as esteemed by Muslims in the East as they were by their cousins in the West.[26] Iconographically these objects, including the *qaliyan* (water-pipe stands), are in complete accordance with lacquerwork and ceramics, heavily relying on the color pink.

NOTES

PERSIA FROM THE ACHAEMENIDS TO THE SASANIANS: 550 BC–AD 650

Introduction

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12. Cristoforetti 2000.
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10. Schmitt 2002: 295–97.
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19. Vanden Berghe 1959: 215–22; Stronach 1987.
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21. Boardman 1994: 47–58.
22. Boardman 1994: fig. 2.36.
23. Calmeyer 1987.b: 569–72.
24. Matthiae 1996: 234.
25. Calmeyer 1987.b: 569–78.
26. Matthiae 1996: 234.
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29. Huot 1976: figs. 21–26; Ghirshman 1982: 213–21; Boardman 2000: 62–77; Miller 2002: 314.
30. Ghirshman 1982: figs. 183–84, 276–77; Genito 1987; Callieri 1998.
31. Genito 2001: 80–81.
32. Vanden Berghe 1989: 1313–14.
33. Roaf 1983: 133.
34. Azarpay 1975.
35. Boardman 2000: figs. 5.5, 5.8–5.10, 5.13–5.14, 5.17–5.18, 5.20, 5.31–5.32.
36. Boardman 2000: 5.19.
37. A hypothesis also accepted by Briant 1995: 92.
38. Bittel 1983: figs. 239, 247.
39. Boardman 2000: 110–11.
40. Kawami 1986.
41. Walser 1966: 11–19, 55.
42. Briant 1995: 28.
43. Roaf 1974.
44. Tourovets 2001.
45. D'Erme 2002: 180–81.
46. Cristoforetti 2003: 58.
47. Imampur 2003.
48. Marshak 2002: 8.
49. Nunn 1988: plates 108–9.
50. Nunn 1988: plate 110; Calmeyer 1987.b: 377; Boucharlat 1997: 502, fig. 665.
51. Compare Calmeyer 1987.b: 378.
52. Gunter 1987; Miller 1993.
53. Summer 1986: figs. 1–2.
54. Kawami 1992: plates i–iv.
55. Ghirshman 1982: 243–66; Moorey 1986: 856–63; Gunter and Jett 1992: 63–77, Piacentini 2003; Rome 2001: cat. 110–15, 118–20.
56. Milan 2001: 119–23, 127–28, 130, 204–6.
57. Compare Summer 2003.
58. Boardman 2000.
59. Kuzmina 2002.
60. Compare Dalton 1964: 19–26, plates xiv–xv.
61. Compare Pichikian 1997: 313–21, figs. 1–3.
62. Moorey 1986: 864–69.
63. Robinson 1958; Bivar 1986; Boardman 2000: 174–78.
64. Boardman 1970; Boardman 2000: 152–74.
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66. Shahbazi 1992.
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69. Barkova 2001: 35.
70. Schiltz 1994: 282–84; Compareti, 2004. b: 130.
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73. Rome 2001: 77.

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9. Lozinski 1959: 22–25, 33–35; Coulston 1986.
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13. Compare Tourovets 2001: 229–33, 235–36, 239, 241–44.
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15. Van Wickevoort Crommelin 1998; Drijvers 1998; Ehrhardt 1998; Rajak 1998.
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24. Bernard 1994: 490–97.
25. Musti 1966: 160–77; Errington 1989: 274–89; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993: 188–216; Bernard 1993: 493–97; Koshelenko and Pilipko 1996: 131–33; Lerner 1999: 45–62; Shipley 2000: 280–91.
26. Colledge 1979: 23; Duyrat 2002: 37.
27. Gaslain 2002: 8.
28. Gaibov and Kochelenko 2002: 50.
29. Daffinà 1985: 163; however, also see Callieri 1996.
30. Gawlikowski 1987.
31. Kurz 1983.
32. Daffinà 1996: 19; Graf and Dreyer 1996: 200.
33. Shahbazi 1993.
34. Bivar 1983: 48–56.
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36. Shiratori 1936: 142; Needham 1981: 240–41.
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42. Bivar 1983: 86–92; Gaslain 2002: 12–13.
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65. Invernizzi 2002: 39.
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72. Kawami 1987.a: 35–37; Mathiesen 1992: 19–21, 173–74.
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76. Kawami 1987.a: 45–48; 1992: 176–77.
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78. Von Gall 1990.
79. Kawami 1987.a: 51–56; 1992: 22, 177.
80. Kawami 1987.a: 57–68; 1992: 165–68.
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82. Invernizzi 1989.
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85. Ingholt 1954; Fukai 1960; Homès-Fredericq 1963.
86. Colledge 1979: fig. 20.
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88. Colledge 1976: 83–87, 221–34, plates 114–18; Browning 1979: 25, 36–37.
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111. Baratte 1996.
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115. Lukonin 1977: 121.
116. Vienna 1999: cat. 36.
117. Harper 1987: fig. 101.
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121. Bernard 1985; Chuvin 1991; Bernard 1991.
122. Ghirshman 1962: figs. 348, 351–52.
123. Genito 1977: 15.
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125. Fukai 1977: 21–61.
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The Khosrow Kings: Continuity As Reinvention

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200. Compareti 2003.
201. Marshak 2002.b: 12.
202. We will grant him the last word, but not without expressing Heartfelt thanks to Matteo Compareti for his exceptional assistance. He has been a truly tireless "fisher of pearls" in this sea, and without his contribution, I would not have been able to take on this task.

ISLAMIC PERSIA: SEVENTH–NINETEENTH CENTURY

Introduction

1. Even in one of the texts that most perceptively delves into the development and evolution of Islamic art, the Iranian contribution, while not ignored, is perhaps somewhat underestimated: compare with Grabar 1989. Ettinghausen 1972 is extremely up to date in terms of its formal rigor and philological acumen.
2. We are well aware of the ideas in Said (1978) regarding the "colonial" way of looking at the so-called Orient.
3. Wilkinson 1973.
4. Whitehouse 1980, with extensive bibliography.
5. Pope and Ackerman 1938–39.
6. Monneret de Villard 1942; Scarcia 1987: 273–85; Scarcia 2000: 171–227, 175–80.
7. Regarding Viar, see Scarcia 1973: 99–104; for the iconography of this dragon, see Curatola 1982: 45–63.
8. Curatola 1979: 7–13.
9. Rogers 1969: 385–403.
10. Scarcia and Amoretti 1991.
11. Curatola 1987: 77–93.

Mud, Brick, and Turquoise: The Architecture of Persia

1. O. Grabar 1989 is still relevant. Regarding the problem of a Muslim aesthetic, also in terms of figurative work, see the essay in Scarcia 1995.
2. Finster 1994.
3. The archeological mission in Esfahān worked from 1972 to 1978, under the direction of Prof. Umberto Scerrato. See the recent contribution in Scerrato 2001: XXXVII–LIII.
4. Eugenio Galdieri's bibliography on Esfahān (not only on the Congregational Mosque) is vast; see Galdieri 1993: XI–XXII. In terms of this mosque, see the three volumes *Esfahān, Masǧed-i Ǧumʿa* 1972, 1973, and 1984. For more on the mosque, also see Grabar 1990.
5. Byron 1993: 239–40.
6. Ventrone 1977: 85–107.
7. Van Berchem 1909: 367–78.
8. It is interesting to note how numerous inscriptions that appear on this monument contain the terms *taʿmīr* (to repair or restore) and *taʾzīn* (to embellish), which have very different meanings.
9. In the restoration work of the 1000 structures (including specifically the one corresponding to a *muṣalla* (open-air oratory) as a *miḥrab* documents), white and blue ceramic fragments were discovered from both the Timurid and the Safavid periods. A careful examination of this material might dispel doubts.
10. Adle and Melikian-Chirvani 1972: 229–97.
11. Denike 1935: 69–83; Voronina 1958.
12. *Corpus of Historical Memories of Southern Kazakhstan* 1994: 133.
13. Zipoli 1977: 41–76.
14. Golombek 1969; Melikian-Chirvani 1969; Pugachenkova 1970.
15. On the significance of Ghaznavid, compare Bosworth 1968.
16. Rempel 1936.
17. Tomb of the caliph al-Muntasir (built at the behest of his Greek mother), who died in June 862; Creswell 1966: 317–19.
18. Hillenbrand, 1989, 31–83.
19. Fleury 1990: 43–58.
20. Golvin 1979.
21. For information on the stuccowork in Samarra, see the classic study by Herzfeld 1923.
22. Regarding Jurjir, compare Godard 1938; also see Grabar 1990: 47–48, figs. 44–46.
23. Barṭol'd 1921; Bivar and Gunbad-i Kabus 1965, 2/139.
24. Soundel-Thomine 1953: 110–21; Pinder-Wilson 1985: 89–102.
25. Maricq and Wiet 1959; Tromsdale 1965: 102–8; Moline 1973–74: 131–48.
26. The decorative analogy with metalwork has been noted in a splendid and very well documented essay: Grazaljan 1978: 55–83.
27. Regarding this specific issue, see Maricq, "La signification du monument: son rapport avec le Qutb-Minar de Delhi," in Maricq and Wiet 1959: 65–67.
28. Ball 2002: 21–45. Another useful essay in the same publication is by Flood, F. B., "Between Ghazna and Delhi: Lahore and its lost Manara": 102–12. Regarding isolated minarets, see O'Kane 1984; Moline 1978–79: 95–102. Seljuq minarets have been studied in depth in Hutt 1998. Also see Azarpay 1981 and Azarpay 1986. Finally, for bibliography and in-depth analysis of Ghaznavid and Ghurid architecture, see the exhaustive Hillenbrand 2000.
29. Burkett 1973; Hutt 1995: 255.
30. Hutt 1995: 256.
31. Crowe 1965: 260.
32. Scerrato 1959; unfortunately there is no definitive publication on this important excavation.
33. Schlumberger 1978.
34. Fontana 2002: 84–86.
35. Kleiss and Kiani 1995: 370–71. Kiani 1981.
36. Pribytkava 1951.
37. Umnyakov 1923.
38. Godard, "Ardistan et Zawara," 1936: 283–309; Ferrante and Galdieri 1968: 473–83.
39. Shirazi 1980: 6–78.
40. Regarding painting in Ardistan, see Fontana 2002: 73, plate 31 and note 131.
41. Robert Hillenbrand's doctoral thesis, which unfortunately has never been published in its entirety, remains the most complete work on the subject, Hillenbrand 1972. Also see Hillenbrand 1994.
42. Regarding this monument, see Pope 1936: 139–41.
43. Holod 1974: 225–88.
44. Stronach et al. 1966: 1–20.
45. Hillenbrand 1999: 107.
46. Ousy 1979: 400–8; Daneshvari 1994: 192–200. Also see Fontana 2002: 75–76, figs. 34–35, plates 40–41.
47. Hermann 1969.
48. Kröger 2001: 47–50.

49. Regarding Nakhchivan, see *sub voce*, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. C. E. Bosworth.
50. Berlin, Staatliche, Museen zu Berlin. Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Islamische Kunst.
51. See the chapter on miniatures.
52. Rawson 1984, chapter 5, "Chinese Motifs in Iranian and Turkish Art": 146–98.
53. Naumann 1966: 35–65.
54. Godard 1934; 1936: 125–60.
55. Daneshvari 1982: 287–95.
56. Godard 1934; 1936.
57. Bausani 1977: 161. Regarding Muslim astronomical observatories, see Sayili 1960. Specifically regarding the observatory in Maragha, see Bretanickij and Salamzade 1956: 61–83; Varjavand 1979: 527–36. Bausani 1982: 125–51.
58. Blair, "Mongol Capital," 1986: 139–51.
59. Much has been written on the Mongols and Sultaniyya. The religious situation has been extremely well documented by Scarcia 1981: 159–72. Also see Bausani 1968: 538–49; Zipoli 1979: 15–35. Curatola 1979: 7–11.
60. Curatola 1982: 45–63.
61. Blair 1984: 67–90.
62. For Il-Khanid architecture, a crucial text is: Wilber 1955. Regarding Natanz, see Blair, *Shrine Complex*, 1986. On the Il-Khanid period in general, also see: Komaroff and Carboni 2002.
63. Wilber 1955, n. 47: 139–41, figs. 69–86.
64. Scarcia 1981: 165.
65. Blair 1987: 43–96.
66. Hillenbrand 1989: 94.
67. Regarding Pir-i Bakran, compare Wilber 1955: 121–24; Paone 1995: 265–78.
68. Fontana 2002: 94, pl. 53.
69. Regarding these stuccos, which are truly precious and varied in typology, see the essay by Grube 1983: 85–96.
70. Miles 1978: 89–98.
71. Regarding Arg 'Ali Shah of Tabriz, see Mechkov 1974, n. 170: 6.
72. Knachkovskaja 1931: 25–58.
73. An excellent photographic survey is in Izadpaneh 1993: figs. 131–47.
74. Regarding this technique, see Wulff 1966: 117–25. The problem regarding ceramists is, in reality, quite simple: the colored oxides have substantially different melting points, and placing the colors next to one another runs the risk of undesired superimpositions or dribbles. Resorting to monochrome sheets, which are then suitably cut and reassembled to create the decorative motif, does not entail technical risks other than the labor intensive process. Naturally, over time techniques became more refined, and thus it became possible to produce polychrome tiles. Also see Wilber 1939: 16–47; and more recently Hillenbrand 1979: 545–54. There are also excellent images in Mirfendereski and Zonuzi 1992.
75. Regarding Yazd, a useful publication is Bonine 1975.
76. Golombek and Wilber 1988: 231–32.
77. The most useful and complete survey of Timurid architecture is Golombek and Wilber 1988. For a general view of this period, see the excellent catalogue Lentz and Lowry 1989, also O'Kane 1987.
78. Man'kovskaya 1985: 109–27; Wilber 1988: 284–88; Masson 1999.
79. It is thought that this is the place where Umm Haram, according to some sources a relative of the Prophet Muhammad (and according to others, the Prophet's wet-nurse), fell from a donkey and died.
80. The contents of the inscription on the cauldron are very interesting; verse 19 of Sura IX: "Do ye place the giving drink to the pilgrims, and the visitation of the sacred temple, on the same level with him who believeth in God and the last day, and fighteth on the way of God? They shall not be held equal by God: and God guideth not the unrighteous," and a prophetic *hadith*: "For he who for religious reasons builds a place for drinking, God will build enormous basins in Paradise."
81. Ratzia 1930. Also see Golombek and Wilber 1988: 255–60.
82. Cuneo 1986: 286–89.
83. Le Strange 1928.
84. Wilber 1979: 127–33; Bernardini 1994: 237–48.
85. Golombek and Wilber 1988: 260–63.
86. Monneret de Villard 1921: 315–24; Sampaolesi 1971: 3–64.
87. Semenov 1949: 49–62.
88. Kouzmina 1985–86; Golombek and Wilber 1988: 271–75.
89. Bulatova 1965; Nemtseva and Shvab 1979; Golombek and Wilber 1988: 233–52.
90. Cuneo 1986: 286–89; Pugachenkova and Rempel 1968; Bier 1926; *Rigistan in Samarcanda* (in Russian), Tashkent 1950; Golombek and Wilber 1988: 263–65.
91. On the astronomical observatories, see note 57. Lacbe-Harkort 1968: 160–64; Kennedy 1986: 578–80.
92. On Gawhar Shad in Mashhad, see O'Kane 1987: 119–30; Golombek and Wilber 1988: 328–31.
93. On Gawhar Shad in Herāt, see O'Kane 1987: 167–77; Golombek and Wilber 1988: 305–7.
94. On Ghazur Gah, see Golombek, *Timurid Shrine*, 1969.
95. O'Kane 1976: 79–92.
96. Hillenbrand 1989: 98.
97. The most complete work is Pugachenkova 1959.
98. Compare Curatola 1989: 77 and related bibliography.
99. Crowe 1995: 263.
100. Pugachenkova 1963; Golombek and Wilber 1988: 268–70.
101. For the architecture of Bukhara, see: Shishkin 1936; Dimitriyev 1950. On the Kalan mosque, see Golombek and Wilber 1988: 228–30.
102. On the *madrasah* of 'Abd al-'Aziz Khan, compare Nikiforov 1930.
103. Dibaj 1968; Morton 1974, 1975; Golombek and Wilber 1988: 362–64.
104. Pope 1956.
105. There is a vast body of literature on Persian gardens; see, in any case, the classic essay by Wilber 1962 and the pertinent essays in Petrucciolì 1994.
106. Tabataba'i 1968.
107. Scarcia and Amoretti 1979; Membrè 1969.
108. For historical context for the Safavid period, see: Savory 1980.
109. Curatola 1987: 77–93.
110. Bastani 1976: 13–20; Scarcia lviii, 7–8, 1978: 387–91; Scarcia 1980: 57–82.
111. There is a great deal of literature on Esfahān. See Holod 1974.
112. Cuneo 1986: 342–47.
113. Carswell 1968; Karapetian, K. 1974.
114. Galdieri and Orazi 1969; Galdieri 1970: 60–69.
115. Golombek 1972: 5–14.
116. Galdieri 1979.
117. Ferrante 1968: 421–40.
118. Golombek 1972.
119. Galdieri 1979.
120. The extremely beautiful *Planographia Sedis Regiae* by Kaempfer (1712) is quite reliable, according to Galdieri. See the essay by this illustrious scholar: "Esfahan e la *Domus Spectaculi Automatorum*," in *Proceedings of the First European Conference of Iranian Studies*, G. Gnoli, ed., Panaino, Turin, 1987, 2, 1990: 377–88.
121. Grube VII/1 1974: 511–42.
122. See note 83.
123. Galdieri VII/2 1974: 380–405.
124. Ferrante, M., "Chihil. Sutun: études, relevés, restauration," in Ferrante 1968: 293–322.
125. Ferrante, M., "Le pavillon des Hasht Bihisht, ou les Huit Paradis à Ispahan: relevés et problèmes s'y rattachant," in Ferrante 1968: 399–420.
126. Luschey-Schmeisser 1985.
127. Beazley 1966; Beazley 1989.
128. Cuneo 1986: 347–52.
129. Wilber 1962.
130. Alemi 1994: 201–16.
131. Luschey-Schmeisser 1969; Luschey-Schmeisser 1972: 309–14.

Timeless Figures: Persian Miniatures

1. In this regard there are important ideas in Schafer 1963; Rogers 1970: 67–80; Gray 1963: 13–18; the influences, in any case, have never been in just one direction; see Watson 1973.
2. The excavations at Neshabur were carried out in Iran in the 1930s and 1940s by an American mission from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the finds were divided between New York and the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran. Wilkinson 1973; Wilkinson 1986; Kröger 1995.
3. An Italian archeological mission worked at Ghazni during the 1950s. Bombaci and Scerrato 1959: 3–55; Scerrato 1962: 263–72; Bombaci 1966; Giunta 2003.
4. Lashkari Bazar, in present-day Afghanistan, has been the subject of French excavations; Schlumberger 1952: 251–70; Schlumberger, "Lashkari Bazar," 1978.
5. Regarding Takht-i Sulaiman, compare Naumann 1969: 35–65.
6. Whitehouse 1980, with extensive bibliography.
7. Regarding Afrasiyab, see Albaum 1975; on Pandzikant, see Belenitskii 1973; on Varakhsha, see Shishkin, V. A., *Varakhsha*, Moscow, 1963, in addition to numerous articles by B. I. Marshak. The classic text by Bussagli 1963, and Azarpay, ed., 1981, are more accessible.
8. For example, this occurs in metalwork. Certain iconographic incongruities have been noted on some Sasanian type silver plates: "They are, rather, a continuation of Sasanian royal tradition and were, in all likelihood, made in regions free from Umayyad control." Harper and Meyers 1981: 141. Regarding the transition period in Iran, between the Sasanian tradition and the new Islamic model, see Bosworth 1973: 51–62.
9. Harper 1979: 75–79.
10. Kröger 1977.
11. Schmidt 1937.
12. Thompson 1976.
13. See note 2.
14. Watson 1970: 41–47.
15. To our knowledge, there has been no specific study on these ceramics; compare Fehervari 1985: 98.
16. Fontana 2002: 77–83, fig. 37 (from Neshabur, "Vineyard" tepe, 9th century), 88–89, fig. 46 (from Rayy, 12th century).
17. Fontana 2002, figs. 38–42 (Neshabur), fig. 47, and plate 43 (Rayy).
18. Atil 1973, n. 50: 112–15.
19. Argument developed in an essay by Simpson (1981): 15–24.
20. Allan 1973: 111–20.
21. "The height of painted ceramics was achieved in Persia with *minā'i* or *haft rang* ceramics, produced, judging from pieces that have been dated, between 1179 and 1242. . . . The expensive nature entailed with multiple firings . . . makes this a product for the most refined audience", Curatola and Scarcia 1990: 124.
22. Caiger-Smith 1985. Watson 1985.
23. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı, inv. H. 841; Melikian-Chirvani 1970: 1–262.
24. One of the many more or less coeval examples is the title page of the Kitab al-Diryaq (Pseudo Galeno) at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Arabic nos. 2964), dated 1199 and executed in Mosul; Grube 1980: fig. 1 in color.
25. Lockhart 1968: 23–31.
26. Manāfi, al Hayawān di Abu Sayyid Ubaydallāh ibn Bakhtishū; Pierpont Morgan Library (ms. M. 500); Gray 1961; Canby 1993; Grabar 2000.
27. Fol. 121; Gray 1961: figures in color on p. 20.
28. Fol. 131; Fontana, M. V., *La miniatura islamica*, Rome, 1998: fig. 22 in color; 500. Fol. 287; 1961: fig. in color on 21; Grabar 2000: fig. 12.
29. Fol. 287; Gray 1961: fig. in color on 21; Grabar 2000: fig. 12.
30. Scarcia and Grube, "Il mondo islamico al tempo di Marco Polo," in *Marco Polo. Venezia e l'Oriente*, A. Zorzi, ed., Milan, 1981: respectively 139–72 and 101–58.
31. Boyle 1971: 19–26.
32. Private collection, London (formerly at the Royal Asiatic Society of London); Gray 1978.
33. Edinburgh University Library; Rice 1976.
34. Fontana 1998: 65.
35. Fol. 47v; *Abraham, Receiving the Three Strangers and Sarah in the Tent*; Gray 1961: figure in color on p. 25.
36. London, Khalili Coll., fol. 36v; Gray 1961: fig. in color on 24.
37. For a long time this manuscript was known as the Demotte *Shah-nama*; Georges Demotte was a Parisian antiquarian who, when he came into possession on the text (or part of it), he dismantled it, selling the individual illuminated pages to public and private collections. Regarding the manner and time in which acquisitions were made for the collection of Henri Vever (now in Washington, D.C., Arthur M. Sackler Gallery), see Lowry 1988: 31–37. For a study of the text and miniatures, see Grabar and Blair 1980. Robert Hillenbrand is in the process of preparing a book specifically on this manuscript.
38. Inv. n. 38.3; Gray 1961: 32, in color; also see, again in Washington, D.C., the eight sheets formerly in the Vever Collection; Lowry and Nemazee 1988: nos. 7–14.
39. Lowry and Nemazee, 1988: 76–77.
40. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. n. 30.105; Gray 1961: 28, in color.
41. Regarding this iconography, see Ettinghausen 1950.
42. Inv. n. 43.658; Grube 1980: fig. 6, in color; for a detailed iconographic analysis: Curatola 1989: 74, fig. 66.
43. Fontana 1986.
44. Not copied directly in various materials, which would occur beginning in the Il-Khanid era; Curatola 1989: 66–76, figs. 52–68.
45. A rock analogous to a twisted tree (and Chinese-style mushrooms on the bark) is in the beautiful miniature entitled *Zav Enthroned*, Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery S86.0107; Lowry and Nemazee: 82, figures in color on 83.
46. Abu al-Qasim Firdusi di Tus (Khorasan), c. 935–1025/26; the work is dedicated to the Ghaznavid Turkish sovereign, Mahmud in 1009/10. There is a fine Italian translation, although it is at this point "historical"; Pizzi, I., ed., *Il Libro dei Re. Poema epico recato dal persiano in versi italiani da Italo Pizzi*, 8 vols., Turin 1886–88.
47. Grabar 2000: 100.
48. The Mongols and the *Shah-nama* are the subject of numerous and lengthy studies: Melikian-Chirvani 1984: 249–337; Melikian-Chirvani 1988: 39–46; Melikian-Chirvani 1991: 31–148; Melikian-Chirvani 1996.
49. The so-called Houghton *Shah-nama*, a manuscript that unfortunately was dismantled among various museums and private collections; Welch et al. 1981.
50. Grube and Sims 1989: 220–23.
51. Moreover, something very similar occurs in China, again with the Yuan Mongols; Lee and Ho 1968.
52. Grabar 2000: 99–104.
53. A quintet, made up of five poems in rhyming couplets (*masnavi*): *Makhzane'l Asrar* (the storehouse of secrets); *Khosrow-o-Shirin* (Khosrou and Shirin); *Laila-o-Majnun* (Laila and Majnun); *Haft Peikar* (The Seven Princesses); *Eskandar-nama* (The Book of Alexander); see the introduction by Bausani, A., *Le sette principesse*, Milan, 1982: 5–32. Another excellent edition is Chelkowski 1975. On Haft Peikar, also see Al-awadhi 2001. For the ideology of Nizami, compare Mcdonald 1963: 97–101.
54. Lukens et al. 1994; Simpson 1979; for a summary, also see Fontana 1998: 68–71.
55. On the albums and their contents, see Grube 1981, a monographic issue devoted entirely to this fascinating and mysterious group of works.
56. Chagatai, M., *Hālāt-e Honarvarān* (Calligraphers and Illuminators), Lahore, 1936.
57. Minotsky, V., *Calligraphers and Painters*, Washington, D.C., 1959.
58. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı, H.2154, fol. 107r; excellent color reproduction in Grube 1980, fig. 9.
59. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı, H.2153, fol. 73v; in color in Grube, 1980, fig. 11.
60. Grube and Sims, 1989: 208–9.
61. British Library, inv. Ms. Add. 18113; see Canby, 1993: 44.
62. Fol. 45v; in color in Grabar 2000, fig. 21.
63. The importance of the iconography of miniatures in the more general context of the Islamic arts has been exaggerated by Western critics, rightly, Grabar 2000: 128, reminds us that at the time there were no exhibitions and museums; moreover, while the structure of society, with its extraordinary mobility, may have encouraged comparisons, social organization, which was basically quite rigid, must have favored the acceptance of traditional decorative models and modules.
64. British Library, Ms. Add. 18113, fol. 18v; Canby 1993, fig. 24 in color.
65. British Library, Ms. Add. 18113, fol. 31r; Gray 1961, fig. in color on 47.
66. O'Kane 1991: 219–46.
67. De Clavijo 1928.
68. This period seems to have been rather complicated; an excellent overall and recent study is by Soucek 2000: 123–48.
69. Tapper 1966: 61–84.
70. Curatola, entry no. 26 in Curatola 1993.
71. Soucek 2000: 134.
72. Ipshiroghlu 1976; Karamagarali 1984.
73. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı, H.2153, fols. 31v–41; 216v, fol. 77v; in color in Fontana 1998, fig. 36.
74. British Library, London, Ms. Add. 27261, fol. 230v; Canby 1993, fig. 28.
75. See note 66.
76. Ms. i, 4628; Fontana, 1998: 85.
77. On the *Zafar-nama* see the works of E. Sims, who for many years studied this subject almost exclusively: Sims 1973; Sims 1991: 175–217; Sims 1992: 132–43.
78. See entry no. 221 by Sims in Curatola 1993.
79. See entry no. 222 by Sims in Curatola 1993.
80. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, suppl. turc 190; Robinson 1991: 8, fig. 2 (fol. 67v).
81. Ms. 239, Robinson 1991: 8, fig. 3 (fol. 286v).
82. In this regard, a very interesting work is Davis and Norgren 1969.
83. The most complete study thus far is Bahari 1996.
84. Khwandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*; cited in Grube and Sims 1989: 208, n. 7.
85. The aforementioned work, *Libro degli uomini illustri*, by his contemporary, the historian Khwandamir, who in any case is no Vasari, contains some useful notes.
86. Ms. adab farsi 908, the double title page, in color, in Grabar 2000, figs. 63–66.
87. Ms. Or. 6810; Gray 1961, fig. on 146 (fol. 134v); Canby 1993: 75, fig. 47 (fol. 214r); Grabar 2000: 115–18, figs. 61–62 (fols. 27v, 16). The reproductions mentioned are all in color.
88. British Library, London, Ms. Add. 25900; Grabar 2000: 118, fig. 63 (fol. 18).
89. See note 69.
90. The library in Topkapı Sarayı in Istanbul has 19 miniatures (h. 762), while there are three in the Keir Collection in London; compare, respectively, Schmukine 1966 and Robinson 1976. The turbulent history of this manuscript is noteworthy, since it explicates the journeys these works sometimes underwent. The manuscript was commissioned by Bābur (son of the famous Baysunghur), but upon his death (1457), it was unfinished, and after the sack of Herāt, it passed into the hands of Pir Budaq (prince Qara Qoyunlu, son of Jahanshah, governor of Shirāz beginning in 1436); it was then sent to Baghdad in 1460) and then, beginning in 1476, it belonged to Aq Qoyunlu Khalil (son of Uzun Hasan and governor of Shirāz from 1471 to 1478), to finally come into the hands of the aforementioned Ya'qub Beg, who finally saw to its completion. However Shah Isma'il had eleven miniatures by the young painter Sultan Muhammad added to the compositions of Shaykhu and Darvish Muhammad; Sultan Muhammad would later emerge as one of the leading figures of the Safavid school.
91. Schmitz 1984: 103–12.
92. Unfortunately, this manuscript too, which was given by Shah Tahmasp in 1567 to the Ottoman Sultan Selim II, on the occasion of the latter's accent to power, and which was formerly owned by a Rothschild baron and then Arthur Houghton, Jr., is presently divided up among numerous museums and private collections. Recently some eighty or so miniatures were acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, in exchange for a large painting by de Kooning, which had never been exhibited. For more on these miniatures, see the detailed study by Dickson and Welch 1981.
93. See notes 56 and 57.
94. Fol. 20v; collection, prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Geneva; reproduced in color innumerable times, most recently in Grabar 2000: 137, figs. 72–73.
95. One of the most extraordinary landscapes ever painted (perhaps by Sultan Muhammad himself), in a *Shah-nama* made in Tabriz in 1335 (British Library, OA 1948.12–11.023; Canby 1993: fig. 49), should be compared with "Sleeping Rustam" and a truly astonishing variety of flora and rocks (not unexpected, if one thinks of the Istanbul anthology of 1398, executed in Shirāz; Gray 1961: 69, fig. on 68 (fol. 26r)), a luxuriant and "exotic" display that brings to mind the work, some centuries later, of Henri Rousseau (1844–1910).
96. Dust Muhammad (compare note 56) mentions Sultan and this painting, where there are "men dressed in leopard skin," a work so overwhelming in its beauty that other artists "bow their heads in shame"; compare Soudavar 1992: 159.
97. Khamsa by Nizami, Tabriz 1539–43; British Library, London, Or. 2265, fol. 187r; Canby 1993: 82, fig. 51.
98. Khamsa, Iran 1490, Add. 25900, fol. 18; compare note 88.
99. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı, H.2154. See note 58.
100. Welch 1979: fol. 32iv, private collection.
101. Attributed: Washington, D.C., Arthur M. Sackler Collection, Freer Gallery of Art, inv. s86.0300; Lowry and Nemazee 1988: fig. 65.
102. British Library, London, OA 1930 11-12.02; Canby 1993: 82–83, fig. 52.
103. This surprising opinion—probably tied to the fact that Tahmasp agreed to Ottoman demands, and in exchange for 400,000 pieces of gold, he had Prince

Bayazit, who had been hiding at his court in Iran, executed—has been put forth by Monneret de Villard 1962: 450–652, esp. 547.

104. On this interesting historical period, see the excellent essay by Soudavar 1999: 49–66, particularly regarding Tahmasp's disregard for the arts (but without any explicit prohibition against painting); see pp. 51–52, and regarding the diaspora of Safavid artists, see pp. 52–54.
105. Fol. 147; Gray 1961: 145, fig. on 143.
106. Or. 12985; Canby 1993: 86, fig. 54.
107. Ms. P.277; Fontana 1998: 117.
108. See note 37.
109. Fontana 1998: 121.
110. A characteristic that is also found in other materials; see, for example, the famous Safavid velvet depictions, inspired specifically by the master; one very beautiful example is the silver brocade in Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, inv. n. 962.60.1; Allgrove McDovell 1989: 166, fig. 25.
111. Dated to 1593; Arthur M. Sackler, Harvard University Museums, Cambridge (Mass.) (inv. 1936.27); compare Grabar 2000, fig. 37.
112. Dated 1692, inv. n. 1960.17; Grabar 2000, fig. 38.
113. There is only one overall study of this subject (and it is excellent), limited to the late fourteenth century; Fontana 2002: 73–97.
114. Specific "boundary" sites par excellence—one arrives impure and leaves pure—where imagery, including human and naturalistic imagery that, as we know, was prohibited in other contexts, was allowed, if not advised; see Arnold, T. W., *Painting in Islam: A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture*, Oxford, 1928: 88; for a late example, of these sorts of wall paintings for a bath, see Curatola and Scarcia 1978.
115. In any case, see, in the chapter on architecture, the Seljuq site of Kharraqan.
116. Grabar 2000: 93.
117. A useful text is Brosh and Milstein 1991.
118. The brilliant essay by Rogers, " The Genesis of Safavid Religious Paintings," 1970, is still fundamental.
119. Fontana 1994.

Flowers of Wool: Persian Carpets

1. See the classic work: Eliade 1974.
2. Ghirshma 1956, vol. 2.
3. Curatola, *Tappeti*, 1981: 34.
4. Regarding the importance of Paradise in Islamic art, see Piotrovsky 2000: 87–93.
5. The literature on this subject is vast indeed. See Gantzhorn 1991: 13–45.
6. In Iran there was a category of objects woven in two colors (white and blue), known as *zilu*, made using more or less mechanized looms, specifically to cover prayer halls in mosques. They often bear the name of the donor who commissioned the piece, the artisan, the date and place of execution, and the name of the mosque for which they were made. They are an important documentary source, unfortunately little known, and they are gradually disappearing, since they are considered everyday objects, not worthy of preservation and study. For more on *zilu*, see Wulff 1966: 210–12; Gluck and Hiramoto, 1977; Vogelsang-Eastwood 1988; Afshar 1992; Ittig 1992.
7. Ivanov 1990: no. 61: 24–25; it is inscribed with a passage from the Koran (Sura CXII), and the signature of the artisan, Mastero 'Ali Nushabadi. An example of a dated *zilu* (Rabi II d.E. 808 / October 1405), signed by 'Ali Baidak ibn Hajj Maibudi, is found in the Congregational Mosque in Yazd: Ivanov, A., ibid.
8. Briggs 1940; Briggs 1946.
9. Compare Lentz and Lowry 1989: 220–21, cat. no. 119.
10. For more on this renowned group of carpets, see Martin 1908; the carpets in the Eshrefoghlu Mosque in Beyshehir are also noteworthy and are mentioned in Riefstahl 1931.
11. Mills 1975; Mills 1983. Recently we have also published: "Con più color, sommesse e sovrapposte / non fer mai drappi Tartari né Turchi," in *Il Rinascimento in Oriente e Occidente 1250–1490*, E. Carbonell, R. Cassanelli, T. Velmans, eds. 2003: 168–79.
12. Lockhart et al. 1973: 126. Barbaro praises Persian carpets as being superior to Turkish and Egyptian carpets: "and at the bottom of these very beautiful carpets, including those from Cairo and Borsa (unknown to me) there is such great difference, as much as there is between clothing of French wool and the wool clothing of Signor Matheo."
13. Hillenbrand 1999: 108, fig. 80.
14. On Natanz, see Wilber 1955; Blair 1983: 69–94.
15. Wilber, D. N. 1955, n. 47: 139–41, plates 69–86; Blair 1987: 43–96.
16. Hutt 1978: 257–58.
17. Pope and Ackerman 1938–39: 452–56.
18. Erdmann 1960: 32.
19. There is an excellent color image in King and Sylvester 1983: no. 58: 85–86. A carpet in the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., (inv. R.33.1.2) also has a central medallion with a similar format (46 × 184 cm), where the central corner pieces are omitted, but the medallion is embellished by a scroll and pendants. The background has a design of vines and floral volutes, a bit more complex than the previous example.
20. King 1983, n. 62: 88–89.
21. Stead 1974; Curatola 1981, no. 67.
22. Morton 1974: 31–64 and 1975: 39–58.
23. There are excellent color reproductions of this carpet, one of the most famous in the world, in Balboni Brizza 1993 (Guides for the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan), no. 6: 40–51. Unfortunately the text is not always adequate (Giyath al-Din Jami is considered "probably a miniaturist of the Safavid court" and is confused with the other Giyath).
24. Curatola 1981, n. 70; Balboni Brizza 1993, n. 7: 52–57, with splendid color photographs.
25. Piotrovski 2001, no. 219: 262.
26. Spuhler 1987, no. 78: 80–81; color photos on 220.
27. Torchia 1997: 92.
28. King and Sylvester 1983, no. 65: 91.
29. Housego 1989: 123–24, fig. 6.
30. For the carpet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, see the color reproduction in Curatola 1981, n. 48 (498 × 340 cm; silk warp and weft, wool pile, and assymetrical knotting with a density of almost ten thousand knots per square decimeter); for the Lyon carpet (inv. n. 25.423; 800 × 400 cm), see King and Sylvester 1983, no. 61: 87.
31. King and Sylvester 1983, no. 61: 87.
32. The development of a Shiite state in Persia is obviously an extremely important event, which in this context cannot be touched upon, and even less dealt with in substantive fashion. Regarding the ideology of Shah Isma'il, see Bausani 1959: 360–65. A brief, concise introduction to Safavid art is in Curatola, "Il periodo Safavide in Persia dal 907/1501 al 1145/1732," in Curatola 1993: 417–23.
33. Curatola 1981, n. 92; the density of the knotting in this carpet is particularly high: 12,700 knots per square decimeter.
34. Color image in Bernus-Taylor 2001. A carpet at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, is very similar; Curatola 1981, no. 93 (238 × 180 cm).
35. Walker 1997: 168–69, nn. 19–20, figs. 88–89. In reality a renowned floral carpet in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (525 × 359 cm; warp and weft in cotton, wool pile) also has a directional design; it can be dated to the seventeenth century and features trees (cypresses, plane trees, cherries, etc.) with springtime and autumnal colors; compare to Curatola 1981, no. 73.
36. Earlier, in the Timurid era, bindings had floral designs that are extremely interesting in this context. See Bernus-Taylor 2001: 173, n. 122 (binding of a *Divan* by Jami made in Herāt in the late fifteenth century (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, supp. Pers. 2050). The complex floral design with animals is generally interpreted as the mythical *sinq-sinq* tree.
37. Bernus-Taylor 2001: 198, n. 137.
38. There are not many fundamental studies on Islamic bindings; see Bosch et al. 1981; Raby and Tanindi 1993. Regarding relationships between Islamic bindings and Italian bindings—an area that has still been studied very little—see the essay by Hobson 1989: 111–23. One of the many examples of binding with a similar scheme as that seen in carpets with a central medallion is in the Arthur Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C., and published in color in Lowry and Nemazee 1998, n. 74.
39. There is an acceptable color image in Housego 1989: fig. 12: 125–26. A symbolic interpretation of these carpets has been attempted in Van Cammann 1974: 181–208.
40. Harvard University, Fogg Art Museum.
41. Scarcia 1978: 387–91; Scarcia 1980: 57–82.
42. Lockhart 1960: 116. Unfortunately we have not been able to locate the source upon which the scholar bases his assertion.
43. Beattie 1976, Beattie et al. 1977: 455–71.
44. Curatola 1993, entry no. 277. Moreover, Venice was not the only city to be so honored; compare Ferrier 1973: 75–92.
45. Although the accompanying message indicated they were destined for the Treasury of San Marco, whose fame and beauty were known as far as the East and were considered a worthy place of exhibition for these carpets, at least one ended up, instead, in the private chapel, as a prie-dieu for the doge.
46. King and Sylvester 1983: 93–96, n. 73. Color photos in Housego 1989: fig. 21.
47. King and Sylvester 1983: 95, n. 72.
48. King and Sylvester 1983: 93, n. 69.
49. Curatola 1981, n. 101; 206, × 142 cm; silk brocaded in silver.
50. King and Sylvester 1983: 94, n. 70.
51. Curatola 1983: 1–62.
52. Seyf 1992: 99–105.
53. Paradise and gardens are intimately connected. On the art of Islamic gardens (and the architectural, town planning, and artistic implications) see Petruccioli 1994 and the proceedings of a recent conference in Genoa, Matteini and Petruccioli 2001.
54. *Cortegiano* (Italian translation, A. Bausani, ed.; Florence, 1978), Iv, 76: "and cushions and splendid carpets shall be arranged on the lawns."
55. In some ways, examples of garden carpets, or their antecedents, can be seen at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (see note 35); or in a carpet fragment with a central medallion in Paris, at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (400 × 345 cm), illustrated in color in Curatola 1991: 136, no. 34 (entry by R. Gilles). One of the most ancient carpets from northwestern Iran is the so-called Wagner carpet, in wool (Glasgow, Burrell Collection, 581 × 432 cm), illustrated in color in Beattie 1976, plate I, cat. 1: 33–34. A more common design is the one seen in a carpet in Kuwait (Jenkins 1983: 143; there is a splendid color reproduction in Denny 1999: 16–19), similar to an example in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (Housego 1989, no. 23). Also see Ellis, C. G., "Garden Carpets and their Relation to Safavid Gardens," in *Hali*, 5, no. 1 1982: 11–17, and our essay, Curatola and Scarcia 1986.
56. On this extremely popular motif, see the chapter dedicated to the subject in Ford 1981: 52–73.
57. Lévi-Strauss 1986.
58. Rossbach 1980.
59. With ambiguous philological and semantic origins in Europe, sanctioned in inventories of Renaissance archives, where carpets were described as being "*a rota*," we cannot know if the allusion is to rose-window shapes, as in those of Romanesque cathedrals, or to simple wheel shapes, the latter suggestion made plausible by certain "pinwheel" drawings. Compare Rogers 1986: 13–28.
60. On Sufis in a Safavid context, see the wonderful essay by Newman 1999.
61. "God, is the Light of the Heavens and of the Earth. His Light is like a niche in which is a lamp—the lamp encased in glass—the glass, as it were, a glistening star. From a blessed tree is it lighted, the olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would well nigh shine out, even though fire touched it not! It is light upon light. God guideth whom He will to His light, and God setteth forth parables to men, for God knoweth all things."
62. Van Cammann 1951: 1–9; Van Cammann 1952.
63. Bausani 1959: 312–22.
64. Curatola 1996: 229–36, which discusses an iconography, probably of Bektashi Sufi origin, which appears on a door of the sanctuary of the mystic Amir Nuruddin Ni'matullah, in Mahan (in the environs of Kirman).
65. Among the publications, see the brief but essential work by Roux 1981: 5–11.
66. This problem is alluded to in Curatola, "Nota sulla simbologia," 1991: 155–66.

Persia between the Baroque and the Neoclassical Eras

1. On Nadir Shah and his most significant monument, see Curatola 1983: 1–62.
2. Skelton 1982.
3. Curatola, "Le immagini," in *Persia Barocca: In forma di Parole*, xiii. Scarcia and Reggio, curators, 1983: 227–32.
4. Hutt in *Architecture of the Islamic World*, Michell, curator, 1978: 256.
5. Meshkati 1974: 233–39.
6. The term is obviously Spanish. "A ceramic decorative technique that consisted of tracing outlines of ornamental motifs using oil and manganese, mixed in such a way as to separate the different colored glazes used for the ornamented objects. *Cerda seca* was used in Spain and in the Maghreb, or North Africa, beginning in the fourteenth century; its use also spread, although in limited fashion, to other Islamic areas, for example Central Asia during the Timurid era (1369–1500)," "Glossario," Fontana, in Fehervari 1983: 226. Mifrendereski and Zonuzi 1992.
7. Catswell 1968.
8. On the Qajar art of ceramics see above all the writings of J. M. Scarce, in particular: Scarce 1976: 278–88, Scarce 1979: 75–86, Scarce 1989: 270–94, with related bibliography.
9. *Husainiyya* are specific buildings constructed as works of charity; they were used for meetings of confraternities who gathered to hear the stories of martyrs, recounted by *rauza-khwan* (storytellers who would recite, sometimes with the help of paintings on panels or canvas). This should not be confused with the Husayninniyya or Nakhl, which are large pointed structures made from wood, which were carried in processions in remembrance of the martyrdom of Husayin and kept at caravansaries. Some of the most famous of these "devices" are those in Yazd.
10. On this *Husainiyya*, see Mechkati 1974: 223–24, no. 377. A fundamental essay on Shiite iconography is Fontana 1994, particularly, in terms of this discussion: 47–56, as well as the excellent bibliography.
11. Chelkowski 1971.
12. Peterson 1979: 143–51.
13. Melikian-Chirvani, "From the Royal Boat," 1991: 3–111.
14. Curatola, "Notizia," 1978: 143–51.
15. Fontana 1994: 53, fig. 58.
16. Scarce, "Tile Decoration," 1979: 635–41.
17. Scarcia 1962: 83–93.
18. Scarce 2002: 181–93.
19. The portrait is published in Robinson 1989: 224–31, fig. 1. On Qajar painting and the historical period in general, see: Scarcia 1963; Falk 1972; Robinson and Guadalupi 1982; Robinson 1983; Ansari, F. M., *Die Malerei zur Zeit der Qadjaren-Dynastie (1796–1925) in Iran*, Paris, 1986; and finally, the exhibition catalogue Diba and Ekhtiar 1999, with extensive and detailed bibliography.
20. Muhammad Zaman, b. Hajji Yusuf Kumi, worked between 1675 and 1688 at the court of Shah Sulaiman (who reigned from 1666 to 1694). On this artist, see: Martinovich 1925: 106–9; Ivanov 1969: 65–70. On the brother of Muhammad Zaman, who was also a painter, see: Adle 1980.
21. The works mentioned, along with three others, are in the *Muraqqa* ("Album") of the Institute of Orientalist Studies of the Russian Academy of Science, St. Petersburg. See Akimushkin 1994.
22. Sims 1979: 408–18.
23. Scarcia 1961: 198–203.
24. Unfortunately, these are lost. Contemporary sources inform us that this veritable gallery of paintings included "no less than 118 full-length portraits" (Browne, 1926: 105), one of which is in the India Office Library and Records (see: Robinson 1989, fig. 5), and another—with notations in Persian, indicating the figures depicted—is in Bologna. For this latter rare example, see Pudioli 1991: 15–19.
25. The collection of Qajar art in Tbilisi is extremely significant: Scarcia 1962: 203–9. Some lacquer objects of excellent quality are in Florence, at the Federigo Stibbert house-museum.
26. Gonzalez 1994.

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